

interzone

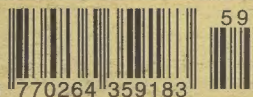
SEPTEMBER 2000

NUMBER 159

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'Incunabula'

Richard Calder



TRICIA SULLIVAN INTERVIEW • NICK LOWE • GARY WESTFAHL

D. HARTMAN '00

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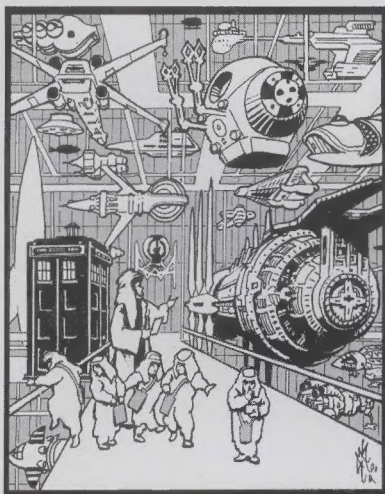
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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

SEPTEMBER 2000

Number 159

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In the March 2000 *Interzone* we asked readers to vote on their favourite (and least favourite) stories published in the magazine during 1999 – that is, in issues 139 to 150 inclusive. Forty-six ballots were received by the 30th April deadline. Thanks to everyone who participated. As usual, we have subtracted all negative votes from positive ones to arrive at the following scores. The total number of stories published last year was 65 – but to save space, and to avoid undue embarrassment for those authors who came towards the bottom of the pile, we list here only the top 40 out of the 65 stories.

Story Poll Results 1999

1)	Eric Brown:	
	Hunting the Slarque	17
2)	Paul J. McAuley:	
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3)	Alexander Glass:	
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10=)	Ben Jeapes: Go with the Flow	9
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10=)	Zoran Zivkovic:	
	The Astronomer	9
14=)	Alexander Glass:	
	Forgotten Tongues	8
14=)	Catherine S. McMullen:	
	Teddy Cat	8
14=)	Kim Newman:	
	A Victorian Ghost Story	8
14=)	Geoff Ryman: Everywhere	8
18=)	Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff:	
	White Dog	7
18=)	Stephen Dedman:	

INTERFACE



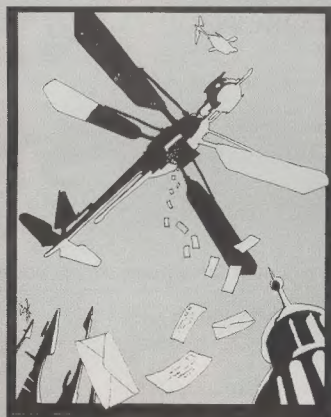
	The Lady Macbeth Blues	7
18=)	Leigh Kennedy:	
	The Bicycle Way	7
18=)	Garry Kilworth:	
	Death of the Mocking Man	7
18=)	Kate Orman: The Bicycle Net	7
23=)	Jamie Barras: The Woman	
	Who Saved the World	6
23=)	Eric Brown:	
	The People of the Nova	6
23=)	David Gill: Of Divers,	
	Hawkers and Slugs	6
23=)	Sean McMullen:	
	New Words of Power	6
23=)	Kim Newman:	
	Angel Down, Sussex	6
23=)	Mary Soon Lee: Lifework	6
23=)	Don Webb: Turn-of-the-Century	
	Real Life	6
30=)	Jean-Claude Dunyach: Foot-	
	prints in the Snow	5
30=)	Alexander Glass:	
	Grandma's Bubble and the	
	Speaking Clock	5

30=)	Helen Patrice: Shaping Up	5
30=)	Robert Reed: At the Corner of	
	Darwin & Eternity	5
30=)	Ian Watson: Three-Legged Dog	5
35=)	Francis Amery:	
	Molly and the Angel	4
35=)	Francis Amery:	
	Molly and the Men in Black	4
35=)	Paul Di Filippo: Angelmakers	4
35=)	James Lovegrove:	
	Terminal Event	4
35=)	Jennifer Swift: Living History	4
35=)	Ian Watson: The Descent	4

Unfortunately, the remaining 25 stories all scored fewer than four points – after subtracting negative votes from positive (some of those stories gained considerably more than four votes, but near-equal negative votes dragged them down). Congratulations to **Eric Brown** on winning this year's poll. It's not the first time for Eric, who seems to maintain his popularity with *Interzone's* readers. He first won our poll in 1988, with his early story "The Time-Lapsed Man," and won again in 1996, with "The Spacetime Pit" (a collaboration with Stephen Baxter). He joins Greg Egan as the only other three-time poll-winner.

In strong second place was the now-veteran **Paul J. McAuley**, an author whose work seems to get better and better. And hard on his heels was **Alexander Glass**, a relatively new young British writer who bids fair to become a popular name. Richard Calder, Tony Ballantyne, Tom Arden, Greg Egan, Tanith Lee, Alastair Reynolds, Ben Jeapes, Hiroe Suga and Zoran Zivkovic all did well by coming in the top ten – and the last two of those, be it noted, were foreign-language writers whose stories were appearing in English for the first time. Our congratulations to these authors, and indeed to all the others who reached the top 40.

David Pringle



INTERACTION

Editor: *Of the various detailed comments that accompanied some readers' votes for the above poll (thanks again, everybody!), the following missive from Paul Beardsley was the lengthiest and perhaps the most interesting. Although we certainly don't agree with all his particular judgments on the stories, Paul's opinions carry some weight, since he is practised at this kind of thing: he used to be Interzone's small-press magazine reviewer...*

Dear Editors:

If I especially like a story, it's probably for some of the following qualities: it's funny, or frightening, or suspenseful, or moving; it is centred on a mind-blowing concept I wish I'd thought of; it conveys a sense of the scale of the

universe, or a long life, or what it's like to travel in time, or whatever. In short, it's something that gives me pleasure after a hard day's graft.

If I especially dislike a story, it might well be because it makes me feel I'm being lectured at by an out-of-touch schoolmaster. If I already agree with the point the schoolmaster is belabouring, where's the need for the lecture? If I don't already agree, a ponderous lecture is hardly going to change my opinion. I'm put in mind of the wonderful Diana Wynne Jones's term "goddy books," and Philip Pullman's observation, "Thou shalt not" is soon forgotten, but 'once upon a time' lasts forever."

I'm glad to see the virtual extinction of pointless parallel-world stories in

Interzone, though I don't mind one once in a while if it is fun. I am, on the other hand, dismayed by the continued glut of stories featuring literary figures (and quite honestly, more than one a year is a glut). I'd like to witness the extermination of all things "postmodern" – an area that tends to overlap with literary-figures stories.

My most serious misgivings concern the misandric tendency that crops up in some of the fiction, both this year and last. Some of it is extremely nasty ("The Denebian Cycle" – an otherwise enjoyable story – and "Shaping Up"), some merely a bad case of stereotyping that would be intolerable if turned around ("Fly," "The Lady Macbeth Blues"). I like to see intelligent, resourceful women in fiction, but not if the author can only portray them as such by resorting to cheap tricks like contrasting them with men who are stupid venial slobs in need of a punishment.

Anyway, my likes for 1999 were as follows:

"The Mirror Repair'd" by Alexander Glass. Very scary. For once, a clever use of literature as subject matter.

"Gorillagram" by Tony Ballantyne. A tad preachy, but believable and nicely understated.

"Living History" by Jennifer Swift. That sense of being there...

"Hunting the Slarque" by Eric Brown. Exciting and exotic, intelligent space opera. And it's crying out to be adapted for audio.

"White Dog" by Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff. Many characters in *IZ* stories seem to be defined solely by their profession, their political persuasion or their street wisdom. It's refreshing, then, to get such a personal point of view, one which we can relate to even if we are not ourselves ugly, and a magic we can easily believe in.

"Go With the Flow" by Ben Jeapes. I almost didn't vote for this on the grounds that it is "merely" fun, and that one shouldn't vote for a friend without very good cause. But I'd honestly like to see more in the Jeapes vein. As with the Bohnhoff, I feel that the character is addressing me personally, and actually cares whether I'm interested or bored.

"Vanguard" by Nicholas Waller. Again, mere fun. The Ballardian stuff about a pretend capsule to the future was weak, but the rest of the story made up for it.

"Teddy Cat" by Catherine S. McMullen. The high point in an otherwise dreary all-Australian issue. The surprising age of the author [*ten at the time she wrote the story* – Editor] is merely the icing on the cake – I would still have voted for this one if she had been older than Jack Williamson.

"Where Does The Town Go At Night?" by Tanith Lee. Beautiful and

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moving. It reminds me of some of my very earliest dreams.

"Death of the Mocking Man" by Garry Kilworth. Another beauty. It's a good woman against a gittish man, but there's no sense that the gittish man represents all men, so it isn't misandric. And while I'm no expert on Far-Eastern mythologies, I've read enough to know that Kilworth has

Yet again, Paul Brazier slips up in naming of parties at parties – below, find John and Yvonne Meaney at this year's Clarke Awards. Poor Yvonne is considering changing her name to the one erroneously attributed to her just in order to save the explanations. We can only apologise and hope Barbara Yvonne forgives us



captured their flavour here.

"Border Guards" by Greg Egan. Two half-stories here. The first half is very hard-going. (I downloaded the instructions for quantum football, but never got around to playing it.) The second half, while not startlingly new, conveyed the sense of living in a society that takes pocket universes for granted. Not Egan's best, but it doesn't have to be to be good.

"The Woman Who Saved The World" by Jamie Barras. I'm voting for a friend again, but hey, it was fun.

And my dislikes for 1999 were:

"The Gateway of Eternity" by Brian Stableford. I thoroughly enjoyed "Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires" (*Interzone* nos. 91-92) but not its sequels. The book *Pi to a Million Decimal Places* was once considered the most boring thing ever to see print; it has now been relegated to second place.

"Angelmakers" by Paul Di Filippo. I gave up after two pages. No sense of why we're being told the story.

"The Sky-Green Blues" by Tanith Lee. What the hell is she playing at? Everyone has their off-days, but this is *Tanith Lee!* Very long, very boring, very small-press.

"Bug" by Jon Courtenay Grimwood. I never really got into cyberpunk – my enthusiasm for Gibson was short-lived – so I approached this, the first thing I have read by the author, with some scepticism.

"The Flight of the *Oh Carollian*" by Keith Brooke and Eric Brown. Another case of everyone having their off-days... Perhaps I'm remembering wrongly, but why on Earth would someone charter a spacecraft to somewhere he could practically walk to? The whole business of being aged while in flux was contrived and utterly unconvincing.

"Molly and the Angel/Men in Black" by Francis Amery. I can do no better than echo my friend Neville Barnes here: Amery is labouring under the mistaken belief that Molly is in any way, shape or form interesting. And yes, please no more *Men in Black/X-Files* stuff; anyone who likes that sort of thing is amply catered for by TV and film.

"Tranquillity" by Mary Soon Lee. Boring and whingey.

"Dream Blue Murder" by Dominic Green. Kim Stanley Robinson did this rather better in "Before I Awake" back in 1989 (I think).

"The Military-Industrial Complexion" by Anthony Morris. Barely readable.

"Stormy Weather" by Peter Friend. Barely readable.

"The Little Ones" by Robert N. Stephenson. What is going on?

INTERACTION CONTINUES ON PAGE 67



Incunabula

Richard Calder

Each Pike contains within himself the spirit of a sword, and the name of that sword is *Espiritu Santo*." My father gave his razor a disdainful glance, and then proceeded to sharpen it on the stop. "But the sword is lost, both in actuality and in spirit, and all our family is left with are the incunabula, such as we have in you, my boy. Though it sometimes seems a curse, as much as a blessing."

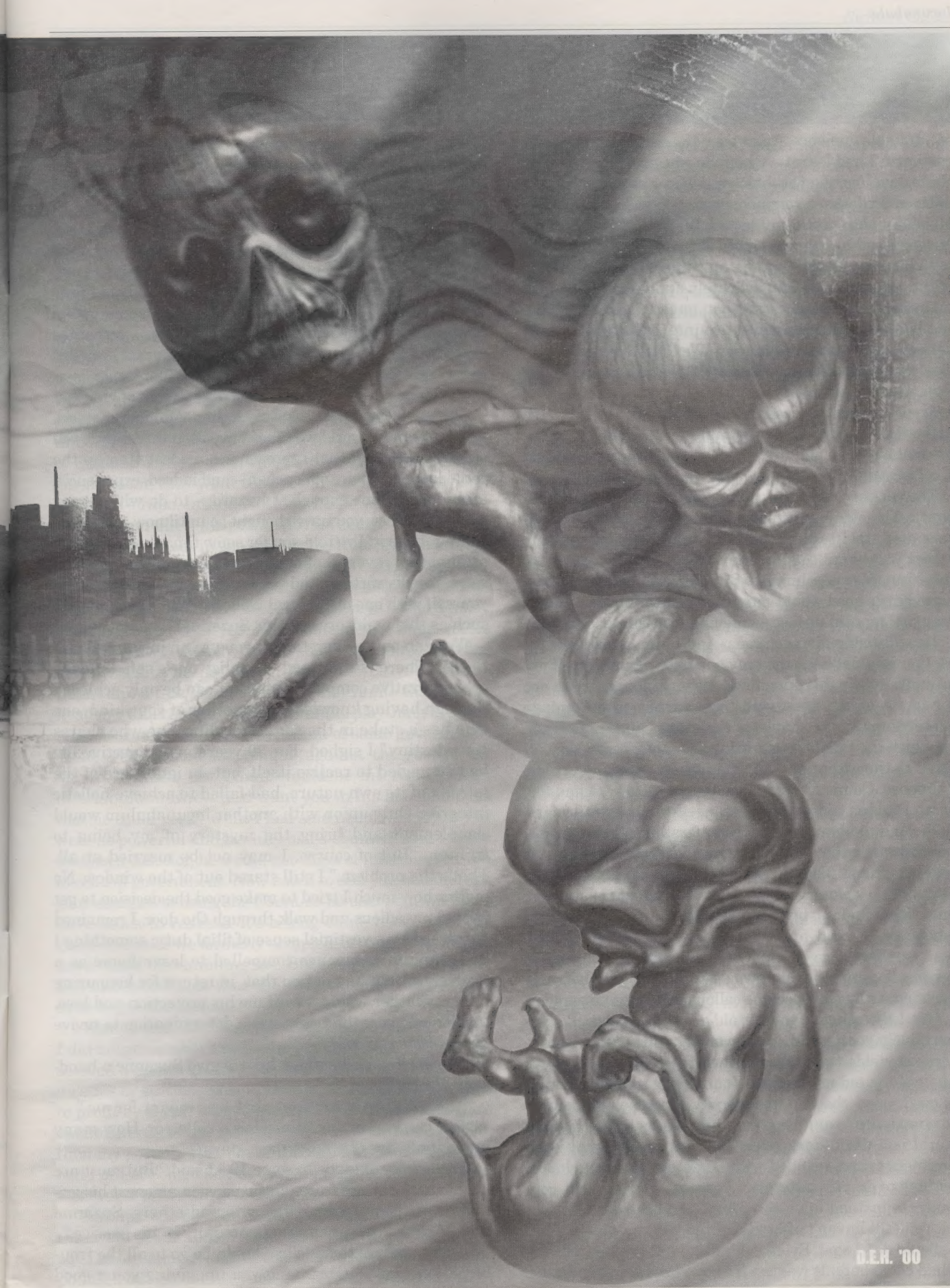
Dad was a great one for genealogy. He had a family tree pinned up on the shop wall. He liked to point out to customers that his own father had had noble blood, and that, if our family's enemies had not been so devious, I, his son – instead of being the valet of a local sheriff – would be destined to occupy a seat in the House of

Peers, Richard Pike, the sixth Lord Soho.

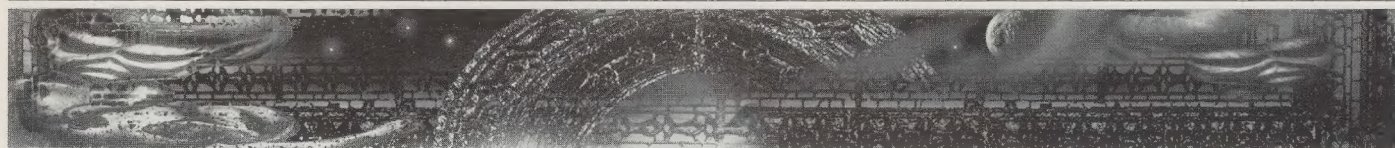
The regulars would twit him. Call him a

dreamer. A fraud. But neither mockery nor the knowledge that our dispensation was surely irrevocable could inhibit my father from concluding his boasts with the assertion that we would one day regain our title. He had spent his whole life duelling with phantoms. And if he had no rapier, he had determined – and determined, I should think, at an early age – to lunge, jab, pink and stab at fate with words. Indeed, so determined was he to overcome the enemy, even if the foe was as far beyond reach as *Espiritu Santo* – our family's lost, mystical heirloom – that my poor mother had died, I think, of eight-and-a-half years of sheer unrelieved aural proximity to such a fanatic. Pride, in him, was relentless, as I too had discovered, shortly after my mother's death, when he had despaired of bringing up an only child alone.

But today his volubility had been chastened by the lack



D.E.H. '00



of a suitable audience. Apart from the old man – a regular customer, I had learnt – whom he was about to relieve of three days' worth of stubble, and who was either deaf or affected deafness in commensurate degree to the promise of being once more subjected to one of my father's harangues, the shop was empty. There was no one to fence with but myself. "Ah yes," he continued, pinching the tip of the old one's nose and delicately applying the blade to an inchoate moustache, "to be an uncorrupted text, a living book which represents a re-interpretation, or subversion, of the past, is a burden. We Pikes have all felt it. The way history is repeating itself. Not in fact, but in fiction. Or rather, in fiction that yearns to become, and indeed so often succeeds in becoming, fact. Fiction as embodied in those new examples of humanity called incunabula. Men and women, boys and girls, who suggest a rediscovery of Man."

The cut-throat razor skimmed across a richly lathered cheek. The old man grimaced, less, I knew, at the application of steel to flesh than in apprehension that my father was about to launch into a too-familiar round of interminable speechifying. But Dad checked himself. "I feared little good would come of you entering the Count's employ," he said at last, somewhat anticlimactically.

He was being disingenuous. And I almost told him so. Mother had not been the only one to be wounded – if not so mortally – by his quixotic *idée fixe*. Eighteen years ago I had, in effect, been sold, my journey into bondage dressed up as "the chance of a lifetime" and "an avenue by which the family might bring the injustices it has suffered to the attention of a sympathetic noble," such as, I suppose, Count Almaviva was thought to be. I had forgiven Dad his cant, if only because I too, over the years, had come to share and thus understand the constant, neurotic ache that was his sense of dispossession; but it had been hard. The conviction that the family's estates and fortunes would be one day restored was a slippery one. Nevertheless, he lost no opportunity of grasping it whenever he could, and whatever the consequences. And, just as there is a point where toleration of injustice becomes complicity, there was a similar point when desperation such as his became callous self-aggrandizement.

But I chose not to go over old ground. I was still comparatively young, and, in the young, a flirtation with bitterness yields the kind of unhealthy glamour that has always elicited my disgust. I am, I like to think, a man of good sense, cheerful in adversity, someone who refuses to bow to life's rankness. And if I acknowledge that the world is a dark, dark place, I see no reason why such darkness cannot be filled with laughter. No; I would have nothing to do with bitterness. I would, I had decided, concentrate instead upon the future. And Suzanne.

"You still haven't offered a shred of advice as to what I should do," I said. Even as I had said it, I wondered why I had come here. It was my first visit in over six months.

My familial past was as obscure and unloved as that ancient world that humanity found itself hopelessly separated from. The future, I thought. Think only upon the future. Depart.

But my legs might as well have been clamped in irons. Outside, the branches of the trees tapped against the mulioned windows. The black, dew-lacquered boughs summoned up an image of glistening seams of coal, and for a moment, I felt the shop might have been some goblin redoubt deep beneath the Earth's surface. I remained seated, as petrified as the alien woodlands that crowded in from all sides, and isolated as the handful of rude, mercantile domiciles that dotted this lonely stretch of highway.

"You are 30 years old," said my father. "And in this world, this rough, feral world we Pikes have been thrust into, you occupy a position that represents a modest step up the social ladder. You are old enough – and indeed, experienced and independent enough, I hazard – to do without my advice. At least, you have thought so until now. But if you want it, have it: I've told you for some time that, until you attain some reversal of our fortunes, marriage will only serve as a distraction. And yet you persist. Why not satisfy yourself with one of the local trollops? Why yearn for one such as this maidservant, this Suzanne?"

"You can only understand if you are an incunabulum," I said. "There is this need to realize one's self, to make one's narrative complete. And that can be only achieved through having knowledge of another of your kind, one who has a stake in the same storyline, one who shares your destiny." I sighed. For 30 years my subjective life had struggled to realize itself, but, in ignorance of the totality of its own nature, had failed to achieve holistic integrity. Only union with another incunabulum would complement and bring the mystery of my being to fruition. "But of course, I may not be married at all. That's the problem." I still stared out of the window. No matter how much I tried to make good the decision to get up, bid my adieus and walk through the door, I remained paralysed by a vestigial sense of filial duty: something I had clung to ever since compelled to leave home as a twelve-year-old: the notion that, in return for honouring him, my father would award me his protection and love. "As I've told you: the Count has a determination to revive his *droit de seigneur*."

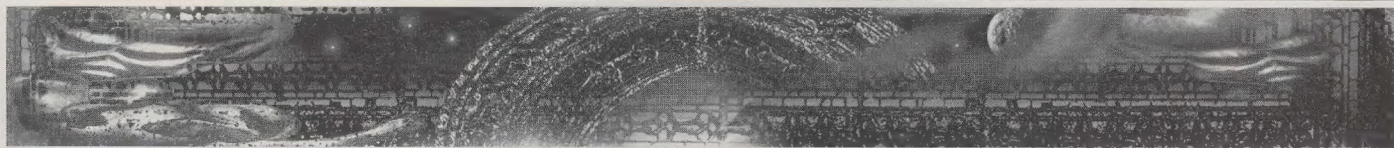
"For which, I understand, he will give Suzanne a handsome dowry."

"And take the knowledge that was meant for me."

"But can you blame him? He's a collector. How many incunabula does he have these days?"

"His library extends to some 19," I said. "But most are misbirths. They are frozen in suspension amongst his grimoires, floating in abortifacients and ethers. Suzanne and I are the only incunabula actually in his service."

"There you are then. Why should he go to all the trouble of keeping you, bringing you up, giving you a good



education, if he stands to gain nothing by it? Forgive me, son. I don't want to sound unsympathetic. But we Pikes go through life with our eyes open, I hope. People like Count Almagiva are doing us quite enough of a service when they're not actually doing us any real harm. So leave well alone. Let the Count enjoy your popsy for one night, and then take her to your bed regardless. Forget that anything untoward ever happened, eh?"

"But the *knowledge*, father. Only I should have the right to share her knowledge and make it my own. The Count is not like me. He can't hope to enter into a perfect, psychic communion with her. But I believe he's studied incunabula long enough to know how to wrest elements of Suzanne's fictiveness and incorporate them into himself. The man's a bandit, no better than the rest of England's aristocrats. Not content with robbing us of our freedom, they want to take our very *souls* for themselves. It's rape, father. Nothing less. *Rape*."

"You seem filled with that spirit of sedition that seems to have taken root in the school. *You'd* have been a pupil there, perhaps, if it hadn't been for my foresightedness." He wiped his razor clean of lather and whiskers and then reapplied himself to his work. "You always seemed a boy destined to abuse his freedom. Someone the magistrates wouldn't have thought twice about stripping of what measly rights he possessed. Better to be valet to the Count and a free man outside the city limits than inside London's walls only to find yourself the plaything of a rich master or mistress or the factotum of some government drone." He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "I knew the Count would be interested in an incunabulum. Knew he'd want you in his household, so that he could verify what I had said about you. That you were as powerful and healthy as I'd claimed. And I knew that, as a collector, he would not think of informing on you to central government. Now listen to me: you should turn your energies to using the Count as he uses you. We Pikes have much to redress. It's a long climb back up to the great eminence we formerly occupied, as your grandfather never tired of reminding me. But it is only by using the foot and handholds that the Count offers that we may even begin the ascent."

I turned from the window and stared Dad in the face. I did not remember much of my grandfather. But he had seemed a man who, like me, had little respect for social niceties or station, except, that is, when he might stand to profit by them. It gave me hope that, if the inveterate snobbishness of the latter Pikes was a matter of blood, then my portion was that of Richard Pike the Third, second Lord of Soho, and not that of his much fallen, if overweening, barber-surgeon son.

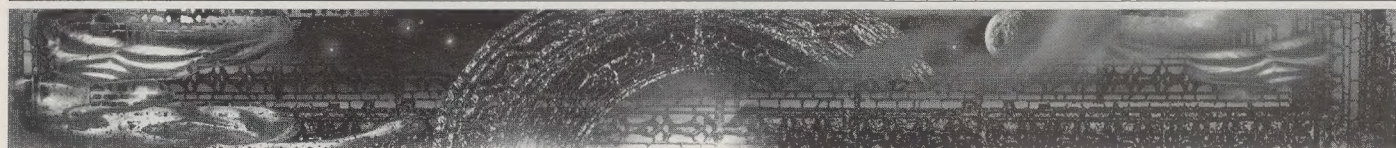
"Perhaps, one day," he continued, "we may even recover the sword of our ancestors: *Espiritu Santo*, lost to the savages and panjandruns of the Far East by the man who polluted our bloodline, your great-great-grandfather."

And is that where it had all begun? I wondered. With a distant forebear who had a goblin girl for his doxy? The first Richard Pike: was that the man to whom I owed my curious status as a living book, or incarnate fiction? Was the curse that he brought down upon my blood the same agent that conferred knowledge and made me an incunabulum?

Perhaps. It was the 55th century. Mankind was extricating itself from the smother and obscurity of the last 4,000 years by discarding its grimoires in favour of those creatures whose existence provided a link with the all-but-forgotten past. Creatures like myself. Living books that had survived the corruptions – both psychic and material – of the interregnum. Books treasured, but feared almost as much as the mutant clans of rat, cat, shark, bear and insect people that had overrun the Earth in the days of the perverse and which, just beyond the marge of living memory, had been confined to the Netherworld, where they had passed from manifest danger into legend. In London, my great-great-grandfather's heirs had been feared because, though nominally human, they represented what was left of the Netherworld on Earth-Above. All that was alien, perverse and – to concede that vanity, in me, has compensated for any lack of inherent Pike-ish *snobbism* – what might be still thought brilliant and beautiful. But despite what my father had earlier averred, the narrative – the twisted, half-formed, preternatural narrative of my soul – *was* a blessing. And more, infinitely more so, than a curse. If my status as an incunabulum really had arisen out of the habitual viciousness of my line, then I thanked the new God. And thanked my ancestors, too, for their wantonness and taste for miscegenation.

At last, I stood. There had been more that I had wanted to confide. For instance, the problem I had, not just with the Count's *droit de seigneur*, but with Marceline. My father avoided my eyes, making a point of studying his customer's blue, newly-mown jawline, almost as long, and betraying the same contaminated blood, as my father's. Grandfather had evinced more noticeable witch-like features, but Dad still had the gunmetal complexion, yellowish eyes and pointed ears that would have identified him as having, sometime in the distant past – even if the genealogical chart on the wall conspicuously omitted to mention it – an orc for an ancestor. And the cracked, fly-specked mirror behind him that threw my own image back at me recalled the fact that, if my outward appearance had been mercifully diluted by three generations of intermarriage with human women, then the inner man had become more, and not less, alien, with time.

It had been pointless to come here seeking advice. I had fallen victim to a sentimental need for reassurance. For approval. The past was a dark pit. For years, I had stood upon its friable edge, giddy with a desire to pitch myself forward, to leap, to fall, to drown, so much had I wished for its bleak emptiness to be filled. It had taken many



years to summon up the courage to walk away. And now that I did walk, I would make sure I did not play the victim again. That wasn't my role. Every fibre of my narrative told me so. No; I was born to prevail. And the time had come to prove it, to embrace the narrative line that, if dim and incomplete, made me more than myself.

I determined I would outfox the Count, take my beloved's hymen and appropriate her vast, psychic energies for myself; determined upon hatching stratagems and plans that would risk all. I was Richard Pike, a lord of the imagination, if not of the Darkling Isle. And damn all humans for a crop of thieving, palsy-minded yesterday's men if they got in my way.

I turned towards the door; opened it. "Goodbye, son," murmured my father. "I'll be at the castle tonight, of course. If I disagree with you, it's only because you're dear to me and I don't want to see you get hurt. I wouldn't miss my boy's wedding, now, would I? No; not for anything. Even if its consummation should have to be necessarily delayed. Take care, boy. And remember: you're a Pike."

I swept out of the shop in silence and hurriedly crossed the highway so that I might be enveloped by the sombre, black woodland. I had gone a hundred yards or so when, in a weakening of resolve, I stopped and looked backwards, filled with the temptation to retrace my steps. Why, I wanted to demand, should I be put in a position of opposing my father? Why should I care so much that he would or could not accept the conditions of my love? The candy-striped barber's pole that I espied through the tangled, ebon branches whirled lazily in the gathering early-morning breeze. Above it, creaking on its hinges, was a sign that displayed three bleeding cups, a hand with an eye in the middle, and the motto *Consilio Manuque*.

It seemed to me that that sign had always been there. But I was no longer sure of anything. The psychodynamic aura that radiates from an incunabulum had been at work ever since I had been born. Wherever I had gone, it had warped local space-time. And over the years "reality," if never responding with an infinite, or sometimes even partial, plasticity, had, I knew, gradually changed, as people, places and things accommodated themselves to the imperatives of my fictive core. The world about me was not the world of my childhood. Because of me, and, perhaps, Suzanne, life in this small part of England was different and suggested unbounded possibilities. How could I guess, then, just how much that sign owed its origins to the greater world? Maybe it really had always been there. And then again, maybe it had been pressured into being at the metaphysical urging of the parallel universe that I carried about within me.

As I continued to stare through the dead, matted vegetation at the swinging, creaking sign, my mind grasped one abiding fact, and clung to it, hungry as it was for a little certainty in the flux between outer and inner existence: I was my father's son. For like him I was the "nimble brain," and,

like him, possessed the "swiftness of the hand" so blatantly advertised by the traditional barber's hoarding. And my name was Richard Pike, too, despite the fact that the people of these parts dismissively called me "Figaro."

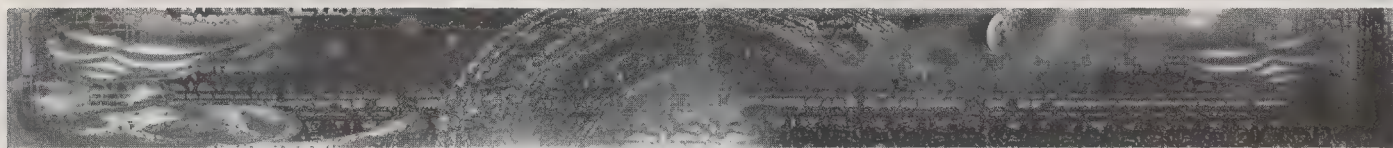


These parts. These people.

I walked through a tract of desolate land north-east of London's high, interdictory walls. It was called the Sink. A dark, barely cultivated waste of petrified trees and coarse, stagnant vegetation. That its denizens were either thralls, slavers or, like my father, men whose delicate state of freedom was predicated upon slave mercantilism, had always seemed to me entirely appropriate, for the dead landscape was thus admirably mirrored by the lifeless, abject curs for whom it was home. They had lived once, truly lived, those slaves and slavemongers, just as the trees in these parts had once been constituted of living, as opposed to dead, matter, even if that matter should, paradoxically, have been stone. For the forest here, as in much of the Darkling Isle, had been transplanted from caverns and galleries far beneath the Earth's surface, where, it is said, all inanimate things have life, and baleful stone plants, flowers and the demons and demonesses who might conceivably pluck them for nosegays, flourish under a black sun, much as life does under our own sun, though in stranger, more perverted, ways. The once unchecked growth of granite and limestone forest cover was intended, they say, to drive men from their cities and into the hands of the armies of the night. But as the wars with the Netherworld and its orcs had been eclipsed by treaties and the retreat of all goblinry into the deepest parts of the Earth, so had what remained of the subterranean *élan vital* that had taken root on the surface begun to wither and become no more than a vast, country-wide necropolis of deceased, atrophied boughs and blooms, an obsequy to the dark past, as forgotten, almost, as the time of the Ancients.

The path I had taken provided a short cut to the castle, but was not without its dangers. Robber bands of men and half-men – those witches whose number I sometimes found myself uncomfortably accounted among – often lurked amidst the gloom of the dense woodland, waiting for unwary travellers. But the sun had been up a good hour, and my familiarity with the terrain had long bred a contempt that vied with that which I felt for the Sink's population.

I pushed onwards. Oblique rays of early sunlight flickered through the fossilized, overhanging branches, and patches of refulgence swam across the crisp mulch that carpeted the ground, like argent petals cast before the feet of, whom? A returning hero, I thought, doggedly apportioning myself a little cheer. Yes. A hero. For I had no wish to think of myself in starker terms of a back-returning, truant drudge.



I passed into a large clearing.

The low buildings of the slave school lay to my right, surrounded by a chicken-wire perimeter. The school served the capital as an indoctrination and processing facility for factotums and pets and was one of the few outposts awarded anything more than cursory notice by central government. Its staff, pupils and garrison supported those few dozen shops and businesses that, like my father's, parasitized the lifeblood of hard currency that flowed in from London. I dawdled awhile, screwing up my eyes to focus on the phantasmagoria of forms silhouetted by the jaundiced light of the windows: boys engaged in horseplay, or else dragging their feet to class, girls performing little gymnastic routines, massive velvet curtains framing a cartwheel, a handstand, a somersault, each big, oblong, candle-lit casement like the black-bordered frame of a strip cartoon whose figures have yellowed with age. The school was no workhouse such as might be found in the forests of the midlands and north; its graduates had little to fear of long years of back-breaking travail or a shorter, if equally grim, career as cannon fodder; its intelligent, amusing, wholly submissive boys and girls – so fantastical, this morning, in their multitudinous arbours of sallow, artificial light – were destined to become alumni whose grace and charm would be the talk of his lordship's smoking room and the scandal of every other lady's boudoir.

Of course, their submissiveness was not something that had to be taught or otherwise inculcated into them. The denizens of the Sink, and its correlatives strung out across the Darkling Isle's wastes, had, at some indeterminate point in their history, chosen to glory in their thralldom; a choice that was, over centuries, and then millennia, to become ingrained to the point of becoming instinctual. In embracing submission of their own free will, and happily, too, they had evolved their own culture, and, to a certain extent, their own idiosyncratic philosophy, a *Weltanschauung* that extolled the virtues of abjection. In other times of acute urban and social apartheid when the world had been populated by species of swinish commonality now extinct, there might have been found a corresponding type of voluntary thralldom, a survival mechanism, perhaps, some kind of process of natural selection favouring those who most avidly sought and accepted the life of a craven submissive. All that was certain was that those who had been born in the Sink – and who, unlike my own family, were here not for reasons of political exile, but who traced their origins to a time before the interregnum – were only content when under the thumb of that authoritarian spirit that ruled the land and that I had myself been born to personify but for misfortune and the implacability of my family's enemies.

In the wastes, there were, it was said, only slaves and free men such as roamed alone, brigands and malcontents who might band together in small raiding parties, or sometimes congregate in vast, locust-like hordes. But of late, another variety of human life had come to characterize the heaths, moors and forests of the Isle's wild, defunct counties and shires. The agitator, the dissident,

the mutineer were abroad, inspiring the freeborn, and sometimes, it seemed, even slaves, to dream of revolt. Rumours circulated of sedition within the school's gates. Impossible tales of pupils assaulting their teachers. "Once we were witches," I would sometimes hear a gaggle of sullen schoolgirls sing, defiantly, as they passed beneath the castle's walls, "but now we're just bitches." And the boys that followed would answer, "Once we were punks, but now we're just hunks." I remembered a passage from one of the grimoires I had seen in the Count's library, a passage that seemed prescient of the delinquent spirit infecting the Sink, or which was, perhaps, only one of many indicia of the eternal state of an England whose people were metamorphosing back into their mad, surly originals after thousands of years:

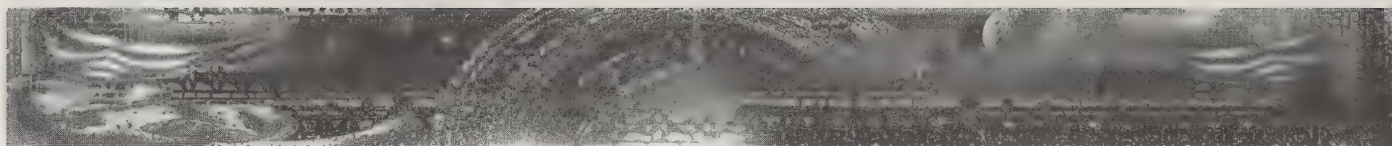
"What, then, is Darkest England? I claim it for the Lost, for the Outcast, for the Disinherited of the World. These, it may be said, are but phrases. Who are the Lost? I reply, not in a religious, but in a social sense, the lost are those who have gone under, who have lost their foothold in Society, those to whom the prayer to our Heavenly Father, 'Give us day by day our daily bread,' is either unfulfilled, or only fulfilled by the Devil's agency: by the earnings of vice, the proceeds of crime, or the contribution enforced by the threat of the law."

I had first read that passage when I had been a child. It had been on the occasion when the Count had introduced me to his library to therein explain my worth to him: how and in what degree, that is, I differed from the collections of fragmented texts that were all that was left of ancient science and art. But was the memory of that reading sound? As ever, childhood returned to me smacking of unreality.

I pulled back my shoulders, tipped my chin to the sky. I was a servant, not a slave, I reminded myself. Salaried, with a degree of initiative and petty privilege that, to the class of humanity that were the thralls, made me seem like a scaled-down model of my master. Rebellion, for me, would be subtle. More potent. More lasting.

I left the clearing and turned into the path that led to Aguas Frescas, the castle of Count Almaviva, Lord High Sheriff of the Sink, my guardian, patron, mentor and suzerain. The forest canopy, that resembled the dome of a blasted cathedral, was here surmounted by the castle's battlements, themselves so like the rooftop of a forest of the night. Those battlements: they suggested the nature of this woodland as it had once been; for Aguas Frescas had been hewn from the living stone of the trees during the time of their dark florescence, its arched galleries and fan-vaulted chambers a baroque homage to the nether-life long vanished from Earth-Above.

The path narrowed, and the branches – the pyre-blackened bones of what might have been long-dead, gibbet-hung orcs – formed a colonnade, so that I would sometimes have to bend my head to avoid bruising my uncovered



poll. The path – the remains of a thoroughfare that excavations had proved was the last remnant of a sacked village or town – was rarely used, these days, by horse, carriage or even man. Yet when I turned about a sharp bend and found myself confronted by three figures, I had no excuse for astonishment.

The man who stood in the middle of the group was, if a menacing apparition, also a familiar one, instantly recognizable by his stooped shoulders and ominous, little black bag. Here, about to make his tiresome introductions once again, was Dr Bartholo, the local quack, much feared by the thralls on whom he practised the black arts of beautification and reshaping. Bartholo. As the doctor's small eyes arrested and then commanded the attention of my own, I knew that his name might as well have been Vendetta. For he had surely appeared, as he had done regularly over the past ten years, to appease himself of the grudge he felt for me and the Count, but whom he could only safely satisfy on Figaro, the despised servant, and not the one who, alone of all sapient life in this region, was allowed to call himself a true man.

The two thralls who stood to either side of him were, to go by their livery, members of his retinue. And if both were a head taller than the good doctor, then they shared his slovenly appearance and shambling ways. They were not graduates of the school, but pinheads: burly, small-brained retainers favoured less for their social accomplishments than for their junkyard-dog aggressiveness and slathering desire to please. Along the coastland fortifications of the West Country, they manned the martello towers that were the Isle's first line of defence against Hibernian reavers. And sometimes the Sink's gentry, such as it was, employed them to collect rents and other debts. Like the debt, I suspected, the doctor felt I owed his *amour-propre*.

"Who goes there, then, eh?" said Bartholo, knowing full well; though the shadows were deep, he had obviously seen me leave the castle and had lain in wait for my return.

"Anonymous is my patron saint," I replied, praying that the shadows were thicker than I had reason to hope. "May he bless you in commensurate degree to whatever disposition you have for allowing me to pass in a state as innominate as I have enjoyed hitherto."

"So you might wish it," he said. "But no: it's little Pike," he continued. "Dick Pike, the barber's boy. The Figaro of the Sink. Good morning, thrall. Good morning, *Figaro*."

"Figaro qua! Figaro la!" said one of the retainers, thickly, as if his tongue were too big for his mouth.

"Figaro su! Figaro gui!" said the other pin, as well-rehearsed, it would seem, as his pard, if as equally in need of some form of oral surgery, as well as lessons in elocution.

"This feud has gone on long enough," I said, in my best, no-nonsense manner, all the while feeling for the cut-throat razor I kept in my belt, suitably obscured by my coat's gold-trimmed flap. "*Espiritu Santo*" – but I spoke to

myself, now, whisperingly, as I always did at awkward moments such as this – "wherever you are, translate yourself into my arm and let me fight as my forefathers did."

As I had recited this heretical little prayer, something rose up within me. I heard voices: those of my father and grandfather, and of his father and his father before him. And then I heard, or rather felt, the low vibration that was the ground bass of the perverse radiate through my body and into my right hand. I was possessed by the Holy Spirit. Not the one that the newfangled Christians talk about, but the spirit of the old gods of the perverse, a wholly alien spirit that offered me power – dark, reality-forging power – if only I should acknowledge it. I did acknowledge it. And knew myself an incunabulum. In the hot crucible at my being's core I felt myself remade, and, as at other such critical times in my life, felt also the world about me shiver and then resettle itself in accommodation to my desire.

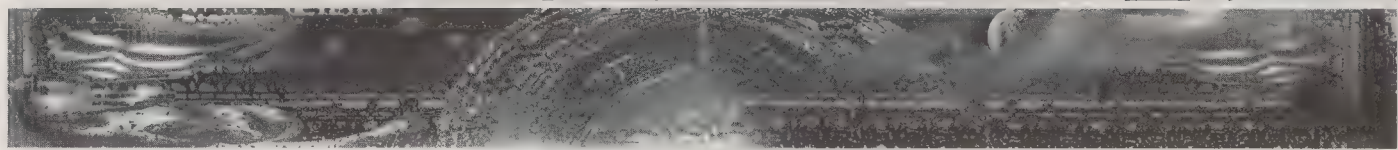
I forgot, for the moment, that Bartholo was gentry. I gazed upon him as I might a pig, hen or bullock about to be whisked off to market.

"This feud has gone on long enough?" he repeated, mockingly. "Not so long as to have me forget what you once did to me, lapdog." The two retainers who flanked him took a step forwards.

"Why, no," I said. "How could I forget, old lecher? I helped Count Almaviva cheat you of your ward, Rosine. Though I sometimes rue it. Not for the hurt it did your overbearing pride, you wretched bundle of bones, but because her ladyship seems not the happy woman she was when the Count first took her for his own, and so saved her from your stinking bed."

If my father had chosen to acquit himself of injustice through the desperate medium of language, then it was in this respect, and this respect more than any other, I think, that I knew myself to be his son. To lunge, jab, pink and stab at fate with words, and words alone, had often been my only option in a life that had denied me more appropriately steely means to satisfy the requirements of offended honour. But language is a terror. A razor-sharp barb can wound, not merely the object of a man's ridicule and disgust, but, by way of a misapplication of vocabulary, grammar or syntax, come to injure the subject, too. For if a sally of wit, a greasily-enunciated slur or a medley of clever, stinging insults, have always represented the thin piecrust of civilization across which I customarily tiptoe, safe from the rancid stew of my birthplace, then so did mispronunciation, a stutter, a single, inelegant aside, threaten to open up the ground beneath my feet and commit me to perdition. How much better, then, to have another, altogether more palpable, kind of razor-sharp instrument to defend myself with.

With circumspection, I drew my little blade, choosing, for the moment, to keep it concealed within the voluminous lace cuff of my sleeve.



"I care not for your pathetic tirades, boy," said the doctor. "Only for an atonement that I would have you achieve through contusions and bloody wounds. Perhaps then the sight of your scarified, slavish hide when I go to visit the Count on my rounds will, if only by virtue of its ruined beauty, vex me the less."

And it was true: I was beautiful. A hundred or more conquests, of chambermaids, parlourmaids, housemaids and scullery-maids, and the applause of not a few gleefully-serviced ladies visiting the castle on their way from London to the north, testified to the snake-like charm of my eyes and my handsome, if somewhat reptilian, profile. I had no wish to have the singular, and – to the fairer sex – wonderfully dangerous charms of my countenance and bearing compromised by one such as Bartholo and his pinheaded proxies.

I pulled out the razor with flamboyant dash and grinned, showing my glittering rows of sharp, orc-like teeth. The blade caught the rays of the rising sun. Its mother-of-pearl handle was cool in my grip. I chortled, my laughter as dry as the barren splinters of leaf and bole beneath my feet. "You might have a word with Marceline, if you're visiting the castle," I said.

"Marceline?" The two pins closed in, their gait ungainly but certain. "The housekeeper?"

"Someone the Count is using to defer my marriage so that he might have the chance of enjoying my bride, whether he has *droit de seigneur* or not. Marceline, you see, loaned me money some time ago, and now she says I either return it or marry *her*. A pretty pickle. But I have heard Marceline is a former lover of yours, doctor. And if the old sow's so hot out of season as it were, I'd thought a man like you, someone with hair as grey, and even a carbuncle or two to match her own, as well as sharing so many other degenerate characteristics, might be better suited to fit her, so to speak. In short, doctor, why not give the hag a roll in the hay and get her off my case?"

"Impudence in the face of catastrophe has always been your style, barber boy. Has it not? Look at you, you jumped-up little pleb. You have no respect for even the

sumptuary laws!"

I made a pirouette, letting the tails of my magnificently embroidered coat fan out, and then, as I came to a halt, slapped a thigh to emphasize the sleek, satin-blue luxuriousness of my silver-buttoned breeches. Not content with such a modest display of exhibitionism, I circled a foot in the air to bring attention to my immaculate white stockings and bright-buckled shoes. Then I made another pirouette.

At the conclusion of this second twirl

I stood with feet set wide apart, tugged at my splendid, frothy lace neckerchief, and, by way of a finale, made a sarcastic bow.

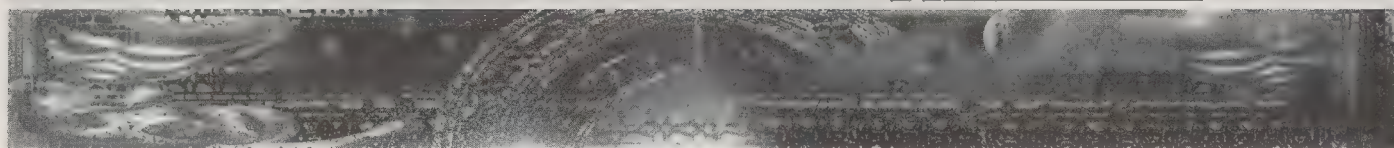
"My life has necessitated a certain foppishness," I said, "in apparel, I suppose, as much as language. I have walked a tightrope, you see.

Beneath me, the steaming midden of the Sink and its prospect of enslavement, to either side, the machinations, greed, prurience and viciousness of those I serve, buffeting me like a wind. I have had only the long, straight, pliable line of my own wits to keep me safe all these years."

The first retainer pulled a bludgeon from his belt, ready to do me some horrible injury. I executed another impromptu bow. Maintaining that mock-humble attitude, I raced in, got under the blow even as it was falling, and, hugging my assailant about the waist with one arm, ham-

strung the brute, slicing neatly through the tendons that ran down either side of his knee even as I heard the bludgeon swish past my shoulder.

I sprang back. An inarticulate query seemed to form on the slave's lips. It rapidly converted itself into a half-apologetic howl, as high-pitched and senseless as that of a skewered marmoset. The pin – his tiny head rocking back and forth on the disproportionately large body – tried to advance, button-like eyes wide with an alarm that was all that he had to substitute for intelligence. He fell to one side as he made the attempt, crashing into the brittle undergrowth that bordered the path.



The other retainer hesitated. But, servile dog that he was, he had to be reminded of his duty by no more than a nod from the doctor than to hoist his own bludgeon and enter into the fray with a joyful cry that celebrated not just his own slavery but that of all slaves in the Sink.

I jinked; slashed across the outstretched arm that swept through space and whose payload had been meant to crack my skull; felt the razor meet resistance as it cut through a black velvet sleeve and connected with flesh and sinew. The big, meaty hand opened and the bludgeon dropped onto the ground.

I fainted, the razor carving at the air this way and that a bare half inch from the big loon's face, as if I were demonstrating just how fast and close I could shave him, if I should choose; indeed, shave the wretch to an early grave, if it should have been my intention. He stumbled backwards, looking left and right for his master, his puny head cocked pathetically for some word of command or discipline by which he might orientate himself.

But Bartholo had already taken to his heels.

I ignored the two bleeding pinheads and continued my walk down the path. I did not choose to pursue the doctor. It would go ill with me if I should hurt him. But I knew he could be relied upon to continue in his persecution, and meet with me on some other lonely, abandoned piece of ground. Even as I wiped my razor clean of gore on the parchment-like leaves of an overhanging creeper, and then tucked it back in my waistband, I knew I would have to keep it sharp. And would have to do so, probably, for many, many years. Bartholo and his kind would always be around. And I – like all men near the very bottom of the social order – would always have my back to the wall.

If I had known, then, how much things were to change before the end of the day, I might, I think, have run after the fleeing poltroon and cut his throat from ear to ear, with as little compunction and as little fear of retribution as if I had exercised my congenitally morbid, barber-surgeon's imagination on dissecting a bug.



The Countess's boudoir was heavy with the perfume of her own patrician status and the rougher, somewhat catlike scent of the thrall-born soubrette who, like me, was a living fiction: Suzanne. The tangy, invigorating notes of the older woman's bergamot mixed with my betrothed's darker, plebeian musk and ambergris, offering an effect that was akin to some piquant cocktail of virtue and vice – that is, of privilege and subjection – that had been sprayed promiscuously about the room. As I had entered Suzanne had looked up at me through her long, sooty lashes, and then again addressed herself to the task of arranging her mistress's coiffure.

What a beauty was my betrothed. She was dressed in a full-bodied white satin gown, the bodice decorated in

the Basque fashion, her own high-coiffed hair set off by a cute little *toque*. And what a tale was hers – a pert, coquettish, lively narrative for those who had ears to hear it – and how much more wonderful that tale for one such as myself who could make it his own. I have always had a penchant for vulgar women. A decided weakness. And in Suzanne, the gestalt of the Sink was salvaged and transformed into an eminently vulgar loveliness; for if she had been born a thrall, she was also an incunabulum, and would not bow her knee readily to any man, except, I hoped, the one she loved.

"I have been giving our mutual problem some thought, my lady," I said, as I took up position by the mantelpiece, my elbow resting on its chipped, marble edge a few inches from the ormolu clock. "And, in the course of the last hour, I have translated thought into action."

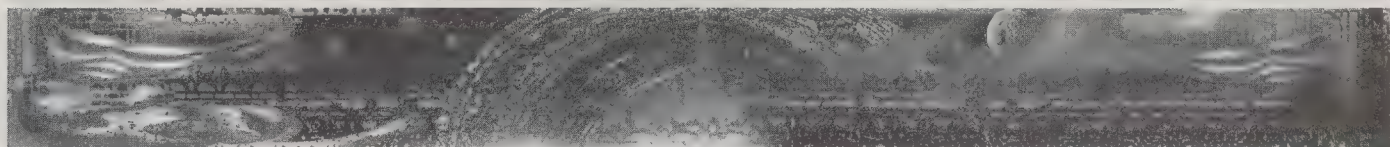
"Without my authority?" said the Countess, looking into her vanity mirror with a cool, judicious appraisal of the cruel effects of time. I looked up at the ceiling, the hand that I had a moment before held insouciantly akimbo working its way up the mouldering wallpaper, a long fingernail picking at the peeling flock. "But then what does it matter," she concluded. "I am ignored by my husband, and so I must expect, I suppose, to be overruled by his servants. Do you know why I especially asked Suzanne to attend me this morning, Figaro, on this, her wedding day?" I shrugged. "Because there's an old rustic saying that it brings luck to neglected wives."

"Overruled? Nothing like that, my lady," I said. "And if I've been a little precipitate, I hope you will consider the state of mind I am in. I am worried. Anxious. Confounded by matters that a man of my background – cursed by fate, as it has been – can have little control over, even if he feels the sting of insult none the less."

"Tell her what you've done, Figaro," said my soubrette, patting the Countess's hair into place and picking at a few stray locks. "Tell her your plan."

"A plan, eh?" said the Countess, "With you, Figaro, that means intrigue. Bizarre intrigue. That is your element, yes?"

I looked at Suzanne and smiled. I sometimes wondered at her faithfulness. I must admit, I think I sometimes enjoyed wondering; for it was the commonness of her origins, the slave glint in her eye that vied with the lively independence of an incunabulum, which generated, in me, such a *frisson* of interest. But her ready accord to go along with my plan – a plan that would allow her to gain the dowry that the Count had offered while at the same time preserving her chastity – convinced me that, with all men, perhaps, but myself, the incunabulum was ascendant. She wanted to be the Count's slave as little as I. But there was always that delicious doubt. And it was a doubt that, I think, she herself deliberately cultivated, knowing, as she did, that the suspicions I entertained regarding her sexual probity excited my amorous



propensities to a white-hot pitch.

"An anonymous note has been passed to the Count saying that a stranger – a man – has been seen with the Countess while he has been out hunting." The Count, I had calculated, might be discouraged from appropriating what was mine by giving him concern over what was his.

The Countess leaned forward in her chair and looked away from the mirror. Her eyes, when they found my own, were red with sleeplessness. "Are you mad?" she said, steadily, but in a timbre designed to leave no doubt about where the authority in this house rested, despite her former rhetorical concession to being ruled by underlings.

"Not mad, Madame," said Suzanne. "Inspired."

"But a man as hot-headed as the Count –"

"Exactly. As a woman you must surely understand that this is the best way of getting him annoyed," I said. "The note states that your lover intends to make a secret assignation with you at tonight's festivities. The Count will spend the day cursing and gnashing his teeth, looking here, looking there and suspecting all. He'll have no time for Suzanne, of that I can assure you. And no time to prevent the wedding!"

"I *must* be reassured by that, I suppose," said the Countess.

"Oh, but there's more," I said, proudly. I turned to Suzanne. "You've sent word to his lordship that you'll meet him tonight in the roof garden?"

"I'm not sure I've ever been happy with *that* idea, Figaro."

"Neither am I!" said the Countess.

I clucked, impatient with the two of them, but especially with Suzanne. Did my soubrette wish to ensure that the Count was true to his bargain and bestowed upon her a dowry, or not? I focused on my betrothed, my eyes narrowing. I was tempted to blurt out just how much we needed the money. But I resisted the impulse, and redirected my attention to the Countess. "Nothing illicit will occur, your ladyship. I'll simply dress someone else up in Suzanne's clothes," I said.

"And who would that be?" said Suzanne, blowing out her cheeks.

"Why the Count's page, Cherubin," I said. "He's such a pretty slip of a boy that it will take no more than a little application of the powder-box, a dress and a new arrangement of the hair, perhaps, to make him quite convincing. And the ruse will not only serve to distract the Count and secure Suzanne and I the payment that is rightfully ours, it will, when all is later revealed, surely chasten him. Do you not think so, Madame?" The Countess studied her image in the mirror, mystified, it seemed, by the smile that she saw crossing her reflection's face. I clapped my hands. Cherubin, who I had been left waiting outside, with his ear pressed to the keyhole, acknowledged his cue. He knocked on the door. "And I do believe –"

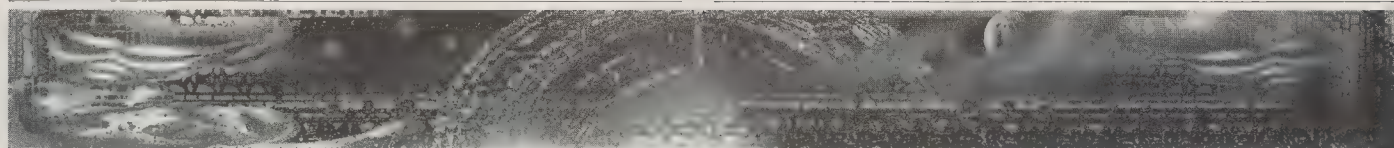
The door opened. The boy – a recent graduate of the slave school – stood before us, a miniature libertine with

sly, downcast eyes, the peril of many of the little scullery wenches and, most particularly, of the gardener's halfwit daughter, Fanchette. He was so delicately made, so fair and smooth of skin, that he looked like an adolescent girl who had been caught trying on her older brother's clothes. To transform the little brat into the appearance of my betrothed would be simplicity itself.

Leaving the two women to effect the wretched epicene's transformation I had retreated outside, where the autumnal sun had risen sufficiently for me to enjoy a little warmth from its rays. I was sitting in the garden, my back against a tree and contemplating my plans, and thinking of ways in which I could make them more complicated still (until the Count found himself enmeshed in a web as devious and inescapable as any courtier's), when my attention was arrested by the sight of a topsy-turvy mass of petticoats and satin tumbling from a first-floor window. Recognizing Suzanne's habiliments even before the falling body had turned rump over crown, righted itself and hit the flowerbeds, I was on my feet and dashing across the short stretch of lawn that separated us, reaching my sprawled, groggy but otherwise intact betrothed before she could raise herself from the dirt.

I bent over, held her under the arms and pulled her to her feet. I was just about to communicate an anxious inquiry as to the state of her no doubt much bruised constitution, when, peering deeper into her half-covered face – she held up an arm as if to shield herself – I realized just how easy gulling the Count might indeed prove if only I could overcome this propensity of my confederates to launch themselves from windows. I smiled, waited for her, or rather him, to lower his arm, then gave the annoying boy a sharp slap across the cheek, whereupon it flushed, as if with outraged, maidenly modesty.

"It's not my fault," blubbered the page. "The Count: he came in just as they were putting the final touches to my toilette. I had to hide in a closet, and then, oh then –" I put a finger to his lips and glowered, silencing him; then I pushed him along the stretch of wall we stood adjacent to until we had passed into a scrub of bushes and away from any danger of immediate discovery. "Then," said the boy, more quietly now he understood that I wished him to continue, "then the Count says he's found this letter, and like, what is it with her ladyship, and who's this bastard she's supposed to be meeting with tonight. Then as ill-luck has it I knock something over – it's so dark in that closet, it really is – and the Count gets all accusatory like, saying to her ladyship that she'd better let him see who she's got tucked away in there, or else. The Countess pretends it's Suzanne. Suzanne chose to hide too, you see, just before I got shoved in the closet. And the Countess she's going, 'Ooh, ooh, ooh, how could you, my lord, you philandering dog and whatever, how could you suspect me of unfaithfulness when it's you who've been running



round with every mobcap and petticoat between here and London. Anyway, the Count goes out to get a jemmy so he can break the closet open, and I'm like shitting myself, but then next thing I see is Suzanne. She had the key, understand, and she's opened the door and, one in a million that that girl of yours is, she's telling me that she's going to get everything sorted like by substituting herself for me. But just as we shut her in and turn the lock the Count comes back and her ladyship urges me to do a bit of self-defenestration. I don't mind telling you, Fig, she didn't have to ask twice. The state the Count was in he'd have eviscerated me, for sure."

What a mess, I thought. "I'll get up there and try to calm things down," I said. "Get yourself out of here, you preposterous boy, before someone sees you."

I hurried back into the house, up the stairs and into my lady's bedchamber.

The Count was standing in the middle of the room. He was dressed in that "cruel seducer" manner – all riding boots and tight pantaloons – that it had been my duty, as his valet, to help him cultivate. He had come directly from the stables, it seemed, interrupted before he could join the hunt by the green-eyed monster that, in his vast, aristocratic conceit, he was so unfamiliar with that its sudden appearance that morning would have proved less disconcerting than traumatic. However, though his face was red, he seemed otherwise in control of himself. Over the years I had learnt that the depravity of the Count's morals in no way detracted from the elegance and coolness of his manners.

"I heard her ladyship was unwell," I said, my tongue as limp as a wet lettuce. The Countess sat in her chair, pale, shaken but with a set to her lips that indicated that she had triumphed, if knowing, at the same time, her victory to be small and of a temporary nature, and that men, beasts that they are, must eventually prevail in their heartlessness and cruelty. "I'm delighted to see that she is recovered," I added, my gaze darting from master to mistress like a man trying to determine which one of the wild animals he has recently had under his control will rebel, leap and devour him. Suzanne winked at me, her hands on the back of the Countess's chair. It wasn't a saucy wink, I knew that; indeed, it seemed fearful. But I was otherwise at a loss to understand its import. I found myself wondering what effect she had had on the Count when, in his jealous fit, he had broken upon the closet only to discover that his wife had, ostensibly, been telling the truth. Little, I hazarded. The Count was without shame. "Since she is so recovered, perhaps I might ask your lordship's permission to allow me to conduct my bride to –"

"And who will look after her ladyship, then?" said Alma-viva.

"She is ill?"

"No; but there is this question of a man coming to visit

her, it seems. Tonight."

"A man?"

"The man in the letter you had arranged to have given to me, Figaro. You two-faced cur."

"Figaro," said the Countess, "the joke's over. I couldn't dissemble any more."

The Countess, it seemed, was as shameless as her lord. Suzanne and I were mere toys that, if failing to alleviate the gloom of their day, would nevertheless provide a catharsis for their respective sulks.

"I'm very disappointed in you, Figaro," said the Count. "I had hoped you understood me, and what I have been trying to achieve."

I decided I would outface them both.

"Oh come, my lord, enough. Let's go to the roof garden where everything's being prepared. Let poor Figaro and Suzanne have their wedding."

"Figaro," said the Count, in an undertone of disgust. "Ah yes, how everyone calls you *Figaro*." He turned to the Countess. "It will be our downfall, that name. Even I have started to call him Figaro, damn it, despite the face that –" He swallowed his conclusion, grimacing as if it had been as unpleasant as a clot of bile. And then he again brought himself to bear upon me, his face like proverbial thunder. "And do you know why, Dick Pike? Do you have any understanding of the influence you are having on us all? The malign influence I've spent years trying to unravel?"

"I've given your lordship nothing but faithful service!" I said, genuinely put out.

"It's true," said the Countess. "The man sometimes has trouble telling the truth, but –"

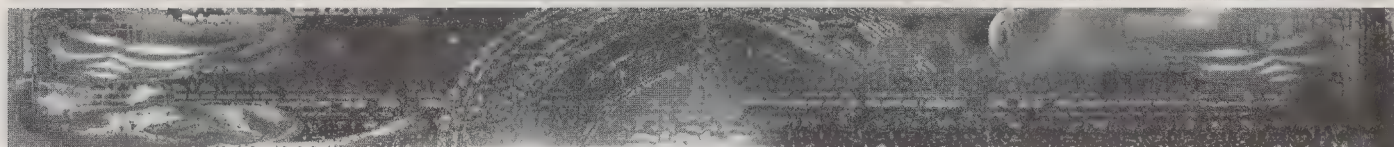
"My wedding, Count," I said, trying to suppress the tremor in my voice. "You'll not forget my wedding."

"Your wedding, ah yes," said the Count, rather nastily. He nodded to someone over my head. I spun about. In the doorway stood Marceline.

"Wedding indeed," muttered the old housekeeper. "And soon, it's to be hoped. But you'll not wed any but me." She turned to the Count. "He has obligations. And I'd implore your lordship to make sure they are fulfilled." Big, viscous tears began to course down her yellow, snuff-stained cheeks. Her face, that always reminded me of a rotten cheese, seemed doubly so now that that jag of weeping underlined its resemblance to a runny piece of cheddar. "He promised to make me his bride! Whaaaaa!"

"A condition" – I said, resisting the impulse to flinch, but nevertheless thinking it politic to edge away from the bawling harriidan before her frustrated passion culminated in an act of violence – "a condition relating to the loan of some cash." I looked at Suzanne, seeking understanding. Sympathy. "Nothing more."

"Marceline," said the Count, in a tone of infinite self-congratulation. "How right you are. Everything must be held up – both ceremony and celebrations – pending a



careful examination of your claims in the courts."

"But that could take weeks," I said. "Months!" The Count's eyes burned with lascivious suggestiveness. I fixed him with an angry look, daring him to bring matters to a head. For several seconds our staring contest went on unabated. At last, I turned away. It was not that I conceded defeat, but, rather, had thought to wait until I could find a more favourable battleground. One upon which a cat might not only stare at a king, but take his head.

"Pike," said the Count, "I would have a word with you. In the library, if you please. It is time you and me came to acknowledge each other's place in the world. Our *rightful* place."

I tried to issue some measure of mute reassurance to Suzanne. But she had her back to me, miffed, it seemed, but, I hoped, not bitter. She knew the way things went in the castle. And she would know, too, it followed, that my relationship with Marceline was purely mercenary. Indeed, how could it be anything else?

I followed the Count out of the door, taking care to step on one of Marceline's oversized feet as I did so, humming a refractory little ditty to myself. "*Sue – Sue – Suzie*," I think it went, "*she's my suzerainty, not this master of inanity, Sue – Sue – Suzie, my story, my cherry-pie!*" Pathetic, no? But the only way, at present, I could defy him. Until, that is, Figaro of the nimble, if by now somewhat confounded brain, had cooked up another stratagem.

Few were allowed within the precincts of the library. Maids, scullions and the like had no place here; for this was a sanctuary dedicated to true men and the rediscovery and, perhaps, re-invention, of that nebulous species, the human race. My duties were those of an amanuensis. I had normally not the time, and certainly not the inclination, to exchange my quill for a pan and brush. In consequence, a thick patina of dust covered those few tables and chairs that I had not taken the trouble to shroud in bed-sheets. And each time I entered the library I felt as if I had wandered into one of the castle's more neglected areas, an abandoned wing, perhaps, walled off for long years.

We walked beneath towering rows of books, stepping fastidiously over rat droppings, and sometimes the carcass of a rat itself. Shafts of sunlight poured through the high, ogival windows, scattering golden lozenges across the floor. The stained-glass vignettes of Christ and his harrying of the Netherworld evinced that the library had once been a chapel, and that we strode down a nave constructed during the first flush of revived monotheism that had emanated from the Far East. Ladders set in brass rails ran the length of the long, deconsecrated room. They allowed me to dolly the Count back and forth as he inspected those volumes ranged some 80 feet from the ground immediately below the rows of stained glass. Our footsteps echoed off the tiles, hollow as the promises of salvation that radiated

from the stone mullions above us, promises that so many of my poor, deluded countrymen had chosen to place their faith in little more than 200 years ago.

We came to a halt at the library's median point, about us the rotting parchment of the incomprehensible centuries, the gobbledegook of a civilization's ruins. The Count stood before the writing-desk he habitually used for his studies. It formed the hub of a little group of furniture that included a chaise-longue, an ottoman and a priedieu. Upon the desk was a small oil lamp and, spread so that its vast leaves took up most of the table's surface, a grimoire, opened at a series of passages that he first glanced over, and then ran a long, elegant index finger across while mumbling distractedly to himself.

"It is like all the other volumes, of course. An anthology of fractured texts out of which scholars like myself have tried to reconstruct the arts and sciences of the ancient world. But these more-often-than-not senseless fragments, which sometimes seem to promise so much, are obstinate, are they not, Dick?"

My gaze, however, as it always was when I entered this place to assist the Count, was fixed upon the rows of vivaria that divided the upper bookshelves from those within unassisted reach. They lay to either side of me a little above head height, a line of tanks whose pickled occupants were strange, misshapen human fetuses and infants, or else adolescents who had succumbed to some of the debilitating afflictions common to incunabula, and had been placed in suspension until such time as they could be cured. But I knew there were others, almost as fully adult as myself, whom the Count had had put in the tanks for other, more sinister reasons, not least of which was, perhaps, that he had learnt to fear them.

"Whereas these books," said the Count, as if prompted by my thoughts, and flinging out his arm to encompass the rows of those who either slept or were dead, "how different *these* are from my dusty, confused old grimoires! How much these children and their like promise to reveal of our glorious past!"

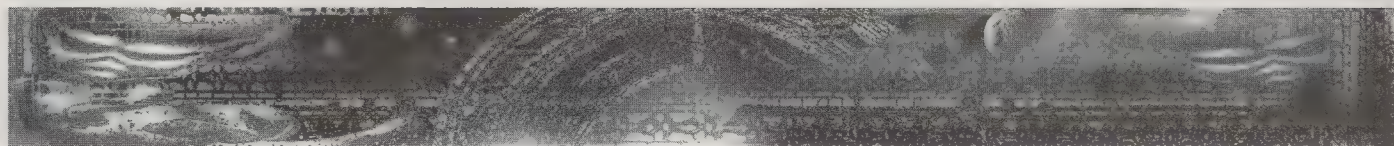
And that was how he thought of me, of course. As something to be used. I cleared my throat. "Only that the past is in danger of repeating itself, surely, your lordship," I ventured. "Is that what humanity has come through so much for, just to relive the past?"

"Spoken like an insurrectionary, Dick Pike. Spoken like a *subversive*."

"And you, my lord? How do you speak?"

"Like a man of my class *should* speak. Of maintaining England's patrimony and the social order. Outside London, there is only anarchy, leavened, in parts, by sad outposts such as it is my dubious honour to command. There has been too much turmoil. Too much madness. We need stability."

"Me and Suzanne. Is that want you hope to gain from us? Or from thwarting us, rather. Stability?"



"It is what *you* hope to gain in life that we have to talk about, Dick Pike." He turned his attention back to the grimoire, his brow creasing with a pedant's sedulity. "We may never know how the Ancients really lived. Most scholars accept that now. The only complete, uncorrupted book of theirs we have is their damned *bible*, rediscovered, to our nation's spiritual cost, by those knavish monks in Cathay. But, quite miraculously, we have found that through human mutations such as yourself, we may come to know ancient *fictions*. That is, we may rediscover the past's imaginative life. Its stories and narratives." Once, twice, three times, he stabbed a finger into the parchment, a small cloud of dust circulating about his hand. "Yes, the past is repeating itself. Reasserting itself. Race memory, it seems, extends to individual imaginative artefacts, and not merely collective myths." He laughed. "It is ironic, is it not, that the very earliest books, so to speak, those that possess the greatest integrity, should resurface, not as physical texts, but as dream texts, embodied in the psychic life of a new race? The sub-species we call *incunabula*?" His laughter died on his spittle-flecked lips, but its harsh, ghostly music continued to reverberate about the library's vault, like a comment on the ancient past whose echoes filled my soul. "Or maybe it is not so ironic. For those old stories seem, by virtue of their very age, to have resisted the corruptions of the interregnum. They have merely lain in wait, *in posse*, as it were, until, 4,000 years later, the human, or perhaps superhuman vessels necessary for their rebirth, were themselves born. Or *reborn*." He looked me in the eye, and his brow creased the more, with irascibility, and perhaps, a little terror. "And that's the real question, eh, Dick Pike? Are you really a mutant, or are you a throwback? A true human, such as we had thought long vanished from the world?"

I had heard this rhetoric before. It did not impress me, much less flatter me. I was concerned only with his initial remarks, which had made a direct appeal to my inherent opportunism. "You said I have something to gain. How do I stand to gain anything if I'm to be denied Suzanne?"

Almaviva sighed. "I know much about you, Dick. Much that you yourself are unaware of. I have, after all, not merely conducted research into grimoires in this library of mine; it is *incunabula* that have been my primary study. Your great-great-grandfather, for instance. Also called Richard Pike."

"A hero, some have said." I straightened myself, and became at least two inches taller, as if I were literally standing upon my dignity.

"He distinguished himself during the wars with the Netherworld, but rather let himself down, it is thought, by taking a goblin woman to his bed, and making her his paramour. The opprobrium he met with was considerable. He chose exile."

"And he chose to take *Espiritu Santo* with him," I whis-

pered.

"His fabled sword. To which some have attributed alien powers. Powers, it is thought, he took into himself while living in *Las Islas Pilipinas*. You, perhaps, have inherited that alienness, just as you have his mistress's goblin blood. It has made you twice as powerful an *incunabulum* as those you see around you." And perhaps, I thought, more of a human than you, Count, for is it not said that the true human heart is a mix of rationality and the bestial, and that beauty, true beauty, is inseparable from strangeness? "It has given you the ability to survive," he concluded.

"And Suzanne?"

"Suzanne's heritage is something of a mystery to me. Though the fact that she shares your extraordinary powers seems incontestable. Which is why, Master Pike, I cannot allow the two of you to enjoy a union."

I bit my lip, clenched my hands and bored holes in the outspread grimoire with the hot, poisonous lead that dripped from my lowered, if far from humbled, eyes.

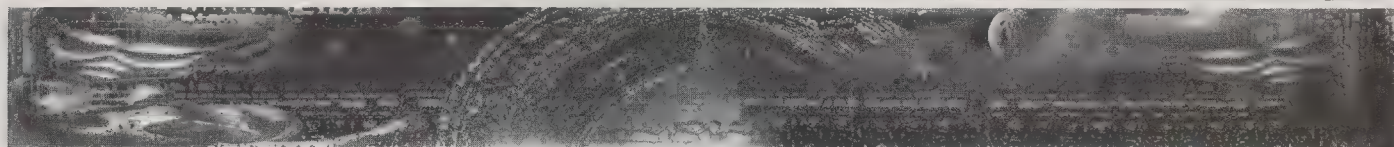
"My researches have revealed this much," the Count continued. "Marriage between you and Suzanne could spell disaster for the social order. It could even provoke revolution." He looked away, scanning the bookshelves. "What we have to maintain is the current precarious balance between innovation, or what was until recently called the 'new science,' and the retrograde tendencies of the *ancien régime* represented by an absolute monarchy and the Church. Men such as myself have achieved much: magnetism, inoculation, quinine, and now, if we are to believe it, the mechanical harnessing of steam. But free-thinking can only go so far if it is not to endanger society's delicate fabric. The anarchy of the wastes would breach London's walls, and all would be a wilderness of slaves, witches and mad scientists, if respect for the social order were lost."

I smiled. "You overestimate the effects," I said, speaking determinedly to the back of his head, "the probable effects from the union of two *incunabula*. Suzanne and I are —"

"Are already distorting local space-time in the manner we scholars call a *time opera*. And have been for some years. Look —" He turned smartly about and again ran a finger down the page of the grimoire that lay on the table. "You have never been master of your own destiny, Dick. The narrative that is the kernel of your soul has distorted your own identity as much as it has that of those around you. Figaro, we call you. And we may learn from certain passages here that you are the psychic reincarnation of a fictional character who did much to foment revolution in the ancient world."

"But that, as you say, was fiction. An imaginative event, not an event in the real world."

"No; this was a case where a fiction directly affected reality. It was a fiction that crystallized long-standing discontent. Acted as a catalyst for revolution, if you will. Have you any idea what effect you have on the slave



school, Master Pike?" He shook his head, with mordant regret. "You have been my amanuensis. My assistant. But there has been so much I have necessarily kept from you. Now listen to me. The thralls know little about you, it's true. But it's the name. The psychic reverberation of the name. *Figaro, Figaro, Figaro, Fig-a-ro*. Ah, that damned, *damned* name. Four thousand years ago there were men called Danton and Robespierre." He pointed to the relevant passage. "They interpreted that cry of *Figaro!* as a clarion call to arms. To social war. To lopping the head off the established order." He removed his finger from the page and tapped it against his forehead. "The same psychic aura permeates the Sink. And it has done so for years. It is only recently that I have recognized it for what it is, and realized the danger. Your medi-umistic powers, Dick. Think of them. Combined with those of Suzanne, the psychodynamic force of this *Figaro* narrative would become overwhelming. What has been until now but a half-realized story would become something that may have disastrous consequences. For us all."

"All this, my lordship," I said, careless of just how much my voice might express my rising contempt, "to inveigle me into surrendering my betrothed? What should a man like me care for the social order?"

"Look at the passage before you, Dick," said the Count, unperturbed. "However the story is consummated, you stand to lose something dear to you, by virtue of the very nature of the narrative imbedded in your being. Here, see? In this section called Act III, you discover that your mother is not the woman you have thought her to be, but —"

"Marceline?" I said. "That's impossible." I spat out a nervous laugh.

"And more to the point, your father is —"

"Bartholo? Ridiculous!"

"Farcical, I admit. But it is the nature of the way things are, or how things will be, if you do not play things *my* way. As I have said: like the rest of us in Aguas Frescas, you are not master of your own fate."

"But," I said, thinking quickly, and almost conceding to a hysterical whoop, "if it transpires that Bartholo is my father and Marceline my mother, then Marceline, at least, cannot exert a claim on me. How can I marry my own mother?" I felt emboldened. "Count, you have merely opened the way for me to marry Suzanne. All hindrances swept aside! But for your desire to enjoy her by way of your antiquated, detestable *droit de seigneur*, that is."

"But think, Dick: if the narrative really is fulfilled, and Bartholo becomes, or is revealed to be, your father, then that would mean that the father you have now would cease to acknowledge you. You would no longer be a Pike. And that means you would no longer stand to regain your title. If the narrative runs true, you remain Figaro forever. And never a lord, whether it be of Soho or anywhere else. As I say, Dick, you stand to lose however the

story ends. If it ends my way, you lose Suzanne. But if it ends your way, you stand to lose your precious *name*."

The words cut deep, as he must have known they would. My innate snobbishness, which I often tried to pooh-pooh, was, I knew then, as strong as any in my line, including my father's. I had hankered after the title so long that I had despaired of ever regaining it; but that did not mean my appetite for a reinstatement of my family's fortunes was any less keen. Indeed, its keenness, made all the more sharp by the prospect of losing my past forever, was suddenly quite savage. I shared the vices of my master, I knew that now. I was like him, if dispossessed. Cynical, world-weary, ambitious, and yes, fearful. Fearful of change.

"Let us come back to the original point," I said. I listened to the calculation in my voice as if to a stranger. The chance that I might somehow become Lord Soho quenched all desire for other things in this life, however much the fiction at the core of my being urged their realization. "His lordship said earlier that I might stand to gain?"

"If you do as I say, Master Pike."

"And it is within your lordship's power to—"

"Though I'm a mere Sheriff, I have friends at court. Friends who are the enemies of your family's enemies. A word here, a word there, and a little purse of gold thrown in the right direction — you really have no idea what such things may accomplish."

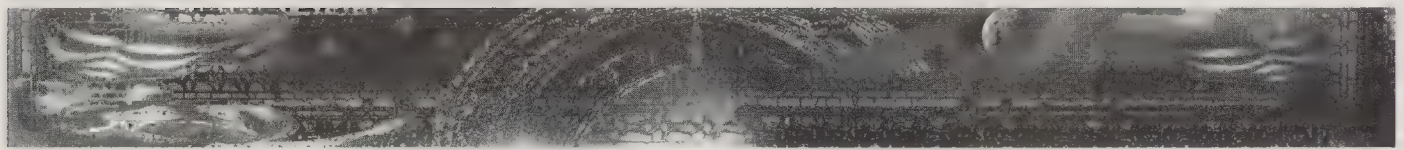
"A time opera," I mused, my own finger, now, on a line of text. "I begin to see what his lordship means. Yes; most dangerous. We cannot have the thralls forget degree and station. Not when men such as ourselves" — and I rested a hand familiarly on his shoulder; something that, until that moment, I would not have dared to do, and would surely have never been allowed to, in any case — "not when this country's hereditary ruling class has so much to lose. And then, as you say" — and I choked back my inclination to laugh at my own hypocritical audacity — "we must maintain the balance between progress and the conservation of order. Where would this country be without its lords and ladies, after all?"

"Where indeed. I'm glad you've seen things my way, Master Pike," he said, shrugging free of my lowly hand. "I really am."

I bet he was, the lecherous old bastard.



The thing was, what was he going to do with the knowledge and power he would acquire in the act of sexual union with Suzanne? For any normal human male, of course, the encounter would likely prove sterile. But, as I had told my father that morning, the Count had studied my kind for many years. And he had for almost an equal number of years played a part in the narrative pattern Suzanne and I had imposed on Aguas Frescas and the Sink. He was distinctly *abnormal*. No doubt he hoped



that, in communing with, and perhaps taking part-control of, the narrative in which his own fate was imbedded, he might consolidate the authority he exercised over this despised, if economically important, petty sheriffdom. And perhaps his ambitions were not as misguided as they might have at first appeared.

The day had been crazy enough. I tried not to think about how it might further proceed.

I locked myself in the library; dusted books; and then, tiring, but unwilling to commit myself to any line of thought, sat and stared at the rows of tanks wherein the suspended incunabula floated, blind, cramped – their bodies curled in foetal attitudes – or else swimming about with nervous, rudimentary and, I had always supposed, entirely unconscious movements of their arms and legs. What tales were there? I wondered. Amongst those whose brains were still preserved, if not intact, what operatic flights of fancy that, if those spastic, jiggly creatures were to be released, would make of the Earth a vast stage for the re-enactment of forgotten narratives?

Odysseus, Almagiva had called one. A Greek name. Over the last 50 years, scholars had come to discover quite a lot about the Greeks. Grendel, another was called. And there were incunabula whose names were Faust, Butterfly and Orphée. I could feel their dull, but persistent energy-field all about me.

But how many of those incunabula were in fact “suspended”? Most, perhaps nearly all, of the vivaria were in truth sepulchres, within whose glass walls corpses floated in an inert amniotic fluid which could do more than mummify its occupants, like the preserved oddities of a freakshow, each exhibit serving only to warn my kind not to overreach itself.

When night began to fall, I could restrain myself no longer. Suzanne, of course, had arranged to meet the Count in the roof garden. It had been my ploy to dress Cherubin in her clothes to give old Almagiva a shock, and part him from his money. But now Suzanne would be there alone, waiting for me, I suppose, in the hope that I would arrive with yet another nimble plan cooked up by which to snare the Count. And a morbid inclination somewhat out of sync with my cynical acceptance of my situation urged me to go and spy on the couple, and thus either hopelessly mortify myself or put the seal on my predilection to laugh in the darkness of these times.

Darkness poured through the stained-glass windows. Darkness was everywhere. I turned down the oil lamp, got up and walked down the nave. And then, with a salute to my fellow incunabula who, I felt, I might well join should my expedition go amiss, I unlocked the doors and left.

Go amiss? Something within me wanted to do more than play the voyeur. Something within me wanted to smash and rend.

Perhaps all incunabula were overreachers.



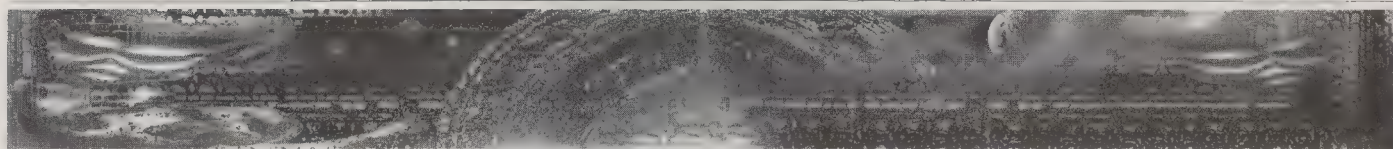
Moonlight played over the chaotic arbours, the orangery, gazebos and tubs of exotic dead plants that stood to either side of the lanes serpentine through the garden's black, petrified undergrowth. The brittle vegetation, frozen in the act of crawling over the castle's flat roof, erupted in irregular clumps of scrub, thicket and bosage. This wax museum of botanical outrageousness was, like the very stones of the castle itself, a homage to the weird, twisted anti-Nature that the goblin people had brought with them when they had sought to colonize Earth-Above. What a fitting backdrop, I mused, bitterly, for a romantic assignation so *contra natura*.

On tiptoe I walked through the shadowy pathways, my passage lit only by an occasional paper lantern. Bunting and other examples of the half-hearted attempt to decorate the garden in preparation for what was to have been my wedding would sometimes brush my cheek, eliciting the kind of disgust I normally reserved for walking unsuspectingly into a spider's web. Angrily, I tore the gaily-painted streamers aside. Then, hearing voices ahead, I forbore and held my breath. Creeping forward, I came to a clump of stunted trees. I sidled into their depths and went into a crouch. Hiding thus I was able to spy on the Count and Suzanne, who stood nearby. He had his mouth close to her ear, doubtless murmuring noxious sweet-nothings into lobes that I, and only I, should have been allowed to nibble and pollute. Yes; I was like him. I had all his vices, and more. And I had the supreme vice to boot: treachery. Was this what, in the end, made me, and would sustain me, as a Pike and lord of the realm?

I heard an exhalation of breath to my right. Smelling a perfume that I at first hesitated to place, and, at suddenly placing – my nostrils stung with the sharpness of bergamot – wished only an ignorance of as sure and fit as the surrounding shadows, I spun about to discover the Countess on her haunches by my side.

“So my errant husband has achieved his goal at last,” she said, ignoring me, her eyes fixed upon the philanthropic Count. “What will become of us, Figaro?”

I darted a look at the wanton twosome. It was as I had always suspected. My betrothed was a slut. The sight should theoretically have had me panting with excitement. But, despite my predilections for a feminine vulgarity whose apotheosis – at least, for a sick mind such as my own – always seemed the suggestion of *easy virtue*; despite the fact that I had engineered my betrothed's unfaithfulness and had, indeed, rejected her for the paltry suggestion of a name and a piece of ragged ermine; despite all this, I seethed with anger. That Suzanne did not scream, claw, bite and scratch his lordship's eyes out, now that the Count had clipped her within his arms and rained passionate kisses down upon her brow, her cheek,



lips and neck, was an affront that I took as badly as I might an assault upon my own person.

"Let us avenge ourselves, my lady," I said, the devil-may-care timbre of my voice so extreme that it almost seemed the voice of another. "Let us get down upon the ground and act like the animals we and, it seems, all human beings secretly are. Let us snort, bellow, and have at each other. Let us indulge in mad, bestial coition!"

The sting I felt as the Countess struck me a resounding blow across the face should not have come as a surprise; but it was so concomitant with the recognition that I faced not the Countess but my own sweet Suzie – she had moved a little out of the shadows in order to strike – that I almost jumped out of my skin. And then, before my syncopated heart could fully regain its accustomed rhythm, I fell backwards, choking back a flurry of laughter and tears, even as I collapsed beneath her blows, my ears boxed until I could feel them glow like the painted lanterns that hung all about us. Not that anything compared with the luminousness of her face. My soubrette, my beloved incunabulum and opposite number in the story that was unraveling before me with a speed that made me almost retch, gazed down, as furiously pale as the moonlight that bathed the garden.

"It's the Countess that Almaguerra makes love to," she said, in a hissing, angry undertone. "We women have some stratagems of our own, I'd have you know. Yes, the Countess wears my clothes, and I am dressed as she, but you, Figaro, stand revealed for what you are. Do not think of squirming out of this one, you mealy-mouthed dog. Your nimble brain is good, it seems, only for mendacity. I'll have no more of it!"

She lifted up her skirts and straddled me. "First, I learn that you've promised marriage to Marceline, all for a purse of coins. And then I discover that you've sold me out to the Count. This farce has gone on long enough. It's time it was brought to conclusion. But not the way you wish, Figaro. Nor the way the Count may wish. But the way *I* wish." I felt the warm, dark mystery of her crotch settle upon my manhood. "I suppose the Count has been telling you that you are helpless, a victim of your own narrative. He's tried that on me, too. But it's a lie. We can subvert this psychodrama. We can choose to make it what we will, just as we can choose to be whoever we want to be. And to punish you, sweet husband, I'm going to show you exactly what I mean!" She snorted back a laugh. "How stupid clever men can be!"

It was a swift and rather brutal coupling. My breeches pulled down with angry dispatch, and my nether parts harassed until they did as they were ordered, she introduced me to the vestibule of Hymen's temple in the manner of a tour guide who shows Master Priapus the sights with her eye continually on her timepiece, her gestures and words mechanical, performed by rote, all the most interesting sights passed by in a flash until, the exit

looming just a little way ahead, the hapless traveller is ejected with only a few bruised memories of the marvellous encounter left to him, and not one lousy souvenir. It was what some, I suppose, who affect aristocratic lineage, call the "minimalist embrace." Whatever it was, it was certainly no Grand Tour. But what went on in my mind during that episode was, if less fleeting, more brutal. Inside my skull, time distended and another kind of tour took place. I stood, it seemed, at a kind of crossroads, an infinity of forking paths. As I hesitated, unsure which way to take, I found myself bundled by unseen hands along a rough highway alongside which I glimpsed the faces of all those I had ever known: my father; the Count and Countess; the scullions and thralls of Almaguerra; Bartholo, Marceline and a score of supporting roles; and finally Suzanne. She was leading the way. Dragging me along her storyline. But rather than participating in that narrative, I found myself overwhelmed by it; parasitized by it; raped by it. I gave her all that I had; she took it, made it her own, and then allocated me a part in her own psychic household.

I was Figaro still; but her Figaro, it seemed. Not the Count's. I was not even a Figaro of my own imagining. I took heart. Whatever Suzanne's heritage, it was older than my own, and certainly more noble.

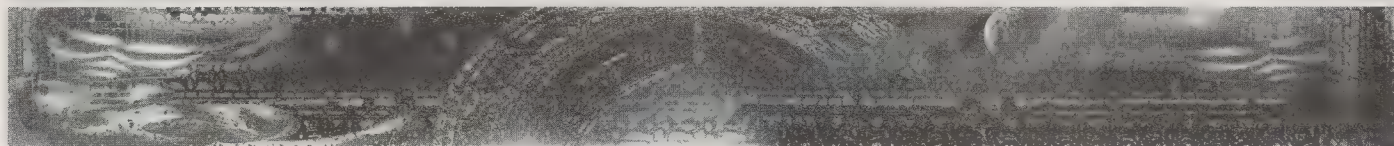
"Listen, husband," she whispered, inside my head. "*I'm going to tell you what you are. What we both are.*"

I screamed as I was granted a brief vision of beginnings and ends, plots and sub-plots, acts, scenes and grand finales, then felt that vision radiate outwards, wave after wave of raw energy pouring from us and invading the outside world.

"*Louis XVI told the author – that is, the author of our being – that he would have to demolish the Bastille before the play could be performed. The opening night at the Comédie Française in April 1784 was remarkable, a milestone on the road to Revolution. Something was born that night, or rather, found its way into our universe, that changed it forever. For all fictions are as much pre-existent as invented, alive in what used to be called Platonic space, and yearning for incarnation. It is Time that they desire, the sensuous dimension of Time, where, at last freed from eternity, they may replicate themselves down the centuries by parasitizing the body of civilization, mankind's collective host. Such was the destiny of our own story, until the perverse came and civilization died. But if human culture became fragmented, its Platonic forms endured. They turned from their natural host, human society, and transmigrated to individuals, propagating along a genetic line in the manner of a 'time opera' –*"

"Time opera," I echoed, grunting. At that moment, my backside was being ground into the mulch. And I no longer doubted if those machines called jackhammers really existed. My love's pelvis fitted their description to a tee.

"*All culture is fragmented,*" she had replied, though with-



out moving her lips, *"but music cannot be paraphrased. Especially not our music. Not our grand, millennia-spanning opera. It has retained its integrity for thousands of years. It has resisted the depredations of the interregnum. It is not humans like us who have mutated, Figaro, but the forms, the Platonic forms. They have achieved a kind of independence. They live through us, but are independent of us, too. And independent, finally, of reality. But it is I who will have the last say. I who, even now, choose to be a slave no longer, but an artist. I who choose to be like the humans of old, to create, invent, assert my own independence, and use this moment to at last fully realize myself—"*

I had screamed again, and louder, too, for I knew that I coupled with a true human, a reincarnation of those beings who had walked the ancient Earth. And as my scream ebbed, I heard the Count exclaim in response.

Suzanne fell off me and lay in the dirt, her mouth gulping at the air and her breasts heaving with such violence that they threatened to burst from the constraint of her tightly-laced bodice. I raised myself to my elbows just in time to see the Countess – for all the world, at this remove and in this darkness, the double of Suzanne – run down the pathway and into a little pavilion. The Count – who had been distracted by the triumphant, orgasmic cry of two incunabula who have enjoyed perfect communion – was unable to make out where she had gone. "Who is that?" he said, more boldly. By now recovered, Suzanne rose to her feet and, smoothing down her skirts and struggling momentarily with the tangle of the obscuring branches, left our hiding-place and walked towards him.

"Count Almaviva," she said, coming to a halt at a spot where she remained still half-cloaked in shadows. "All has been concluded. Your days are numbered. My husband and I are one." She had spoken, I noticed, in the manner of the Countess.

"What are you talking about? And where did you vanish to?" cried the Count, believing Suzanne to be his wife. "And why is your dress so torn and muddy? And who is that figure with you, skulking in the trees?" he added, pointing in my direction. "You! Yes, you over there! Come out this instant!"

I got to my feet, adjusted my breeches, and walked out into the clearing, a little behind where Suzanne stood.

"You!" said the Count, astonished. My flamboyant clothes made me instantly recognizable, it seemed, despite the shadows. "You – and my wife!"

"No, of course not," I said, "this is a simple case of mistaken identity. A popular dramatic device. Look. Let me explain –" But Suzanne had calculated what would happen next. Or rather, she radiated an energy field that, now that it had harmonized itself with my own, was so intense that all within its bounds lost independent will and became an extension of her storyline. She would have her revenge on the Count. And, it seemed, on me.

"Explain?" The Count drew his rapier. "I am expected

to listen to my valet's explanations when he has been caught in *flagrante delicto* with my wife?"

He moved towards me. I felt for my razor, knowing that there was no alternative, now, but to fight and play my part in whatever denouement Suzanne had chosen for the two of us.

"Lights!" cried the Count. "Servants! Guards!" It was evident that he had no wish to engage with a lowly creature like myself on such a compromised field of honour. A gentleman, confronted in his own backyard by a lout with a cut-throat razor, will let his retainers sort matters out. I had, however, no intention of waiting for my fellow flunkies to appear and give me a mortal thrashing such as befitted not only my supposed crime, but station. With a will that he seemed to find as astonishing as discovering his wife *post coitum* in the presence of his valet, I ran forward, low, and, it transpired, with sufficient fleetness to avoid the arrogantly lazy sweep of his blade. I slashed at his thighs, but the Count, not so soused by wine, rich food and general dissipation as to forget his weekly fencing practise, managed to avoid my own blade's parabola, and I succeeded only in effecting a tear in the silk of his breeches.

Then I jabbed, but he had recovered enough to skip back a step, the rapier's cruelly-honed extremity suddenly hovering an inch in front of my Adam's apple before I, who had not his advantage in a *salle d'armes*, could reposition myself, either for attack or defence.

"So here it ends, barber's boy," he said. "And to think that you have such airs and graces as to have believed that I might have chosen to have ennobled you and made you into an image of myself. You – a half-man, half-orc, a travesty of humanity, a witch whose ancestors were thrown out of London for having the *perverse* in their veins. Whose family's title was, in any case, only held for two generations. Lord Soho indeed!"

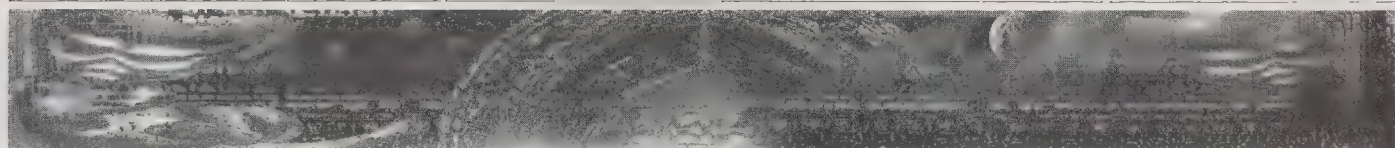
"Count Almaviva!"

The Count looked over his shoulder and then, recognizing the Countess, who stood but a few feet from him, turned about full to confront the ghastly doppelgänger.

"It is as Suzanne has said. It is over. Your days, and the days of oppression, are over. This is the end of our story, I fear. If the beginning of another."

He was, I think, in the process of spinning about to double check that it was his wife that spoke, and that the one he had mistaken for her was, in fact, her maid-servant, when I pulled back my right arm and, with a cry of "*Espiritu Santo!*", sent the razor flying through the air. It caught him just below the right shoulder blade and, I believe, must have immediately penetrated his heart, for his spin was checked. He turned to again face the true Countess, dropping the rapier as he did so.

He staggered a little, and though his heart could no longer have been capable of performing quite all the errands necessary to sustain life, it still beat with suf-



ficient celerity to keep him going for a few seconds more; enough time, at least, to enable him to cross the part of the garden we occupied and, with a melodramatic concession to approaching mortality, tip himself lordly over the battlements and into space.

I rushed to the embrasure which had been Count Almaviva's last acquaintance with the material things of this Earth. Peering down into the darkness I found that I was in time to witness his corpse arcing away from the wall and towards the moat, tumbling, over and over, a scarecrow incongruously appressed in rich silks and brocades. But the other spectacle that confronted me was so grand, and so contrary to the small thrill communicated by sight of his lordship's demise, that I paid no more attention to him, not even when I heard the far-off splash that confirmed that he been committed to the cold, murky waters far below.

The courtyard was filled with thralls, each of whom carried a fiery brand. Others – thousands in number, and likewise carrying flaming torches – approached from the dark marge of the woodland. Amongst their number I spied soldiers – soldiers who, until now, would have regarded those they stood shoulder to shoulder with as no more than contemptible playthings: boys and girls to be spat upon as soon as applauded for some clever trick or turn of phrase. Then I looked out, far out, over their heads and over the forest canopy. Standing some 300 feet in the air as I was, I could see, in the distance, a greater conflagration; the slave school itself was ablaze. Tiny, dancing figures ringed its flickering shadows, or else broke away to converge on the castle to join their rebellious comrades. Shaken from the trance-like hold of this spectacle by a growing murmur from immediately below, I looked down to see multitudinous eyes staring up at me, as the thralls who had followed the arc of Almaviva's descent found its point of origin. And then with one great voice the mob called out "*Figaro, Figaro, Figaro, Fig-a-ro!*"

I retraced my steps, holding my pounding head with one hand, seeking my way forward with the other, like one who is about to swoon. As I beheld Suzanne, I recovered, breathed deeply and held out my hand to her. She took it.

"It's all changed now," she said. "Do you think you can accept that you'll never be a lord?"

"I believe I can," I said, smiling. For that impossibly far-off prospect of ennoblement had only been a symbol, I think, of the remaking of myself. "This is better," I concluded. "This person who I've always been, if I'd only known it. Better, yes, better by far."

Those amongst the castle's retainers who had responded to Almaviva's summons encircled us. Scullions and gardeners, chambermaids, parlourmaids, housemaids and scullery-maids, snot-nosed little boys and girls of-all-work and even the drunken gardener, Antonio, and his little daughter, Fanchette. Cherubin – that ridiculous milksop

an apprentice to the late Count in matters of libertinage, it would seem, just as I had almost been – goosed the little girl while the general attention was upon me and Suzanne. I looked from one face to another, seeking signs of resistance. There were none. Neither were there signs of that happily-embraced submissiveness that usually informed their bearing. Even Bartholo was there, and Marceline too. They held each other's hand, mirroring the pose Suzanne and I had adopted, acknowledging that they loved each other, too, but no longer felt any enmity for me. If the retainers had abandoned their slavishness, so had Bartholo, and perhaps all gentry in these parts, abjured their rank. All was transformed. All was made amiable, strong and new.

And then my gaze fell upon my father.

"So this is how you celebrate your wedding?" he said. "What will become of the family now? No one to help us regain our title, and, if this sort of thing catches on, no titles left in all the Darkling Isle, I should imagine. No, none at all! Still, to be an uncorrupted text, a living book which represents a re-interpretation, or subversion, of the past, is a burden. I've always known it. All the Pikes have known it. Still, what a business! What a night!"

"I'm still your son," I said. "I always will be. Richard Pike, that's me."

"There will never be another Lord Soho. And the sword is lost, now, forever."

"It lives," I asserted. "*Espiritu Santo* lives. In spirit. My spirit."

And just as I believed that, contrary to what I had asserted, Suzanne's rewriting of all our lives had served to confer on me the name Figaro, too, as well as my real name, and confer it upon me for all time, so that, in effect, my identity was interchangeable, I heard the cheers outside the walls demur, then rise again, reconsolidating as they adopted a slow, chanted rhythm.

"*Lord So-ho*," came the cry, "*Lord So-ho, Lord So-ho*." And hearing it, I knew that my power and influence as an incunabulum was in direct proportion to Suzanne's own, that I was choosing my destiny, as she had chosen hers.

We would be married forthwith. I set the retainers to organize the proceedings, and called for music and wine and dancing to follow.

If I was Figaro, I would be a Pike, too. A Lord Soho. If a Lord Soho of the mind. A lord of the imagination and spirit. For I was a human. A true human. Not like those blue-blooded pretenders in old London town, whose human lineaments were soiled, and who, fools that they were, proudly called that sterility their "pedigree." I was one of the ancient men reborn. I knew that now. Had known it ever since entering into communion with Suzanne. Our heritage was no enigma. Glorious mongrels, amalgams of animality and the life of reason, we heralded a new age. That the rebirth had been enacted in a confluence of strangeness and perversity was right.

For the heart of mankind was an erotic union of the angelic and demonic. And wherever we should go, the aura of that truth would infect and reshape reality. Let the Earth make way for our kind. Men and women who would choose who they were to be, but were at the same time embodiments of older selves, of humanity's ancient, collective soul. Men and women who would not blindly relive the past, but re-invent it.

I tilted my chin to the stars. I no longer cared for the fine line that sometimes divides fiction from fact. My will was set to roam through the world of the imagination and the real world knowing no limit or restraint. And later, as I slipped my arm about Suzanne's waist and kissed her powdered cheek, and as celebratory fireworks burst in the skies above Aguas Frescas, and as the music rose and song and stars conspired to make a celestial harmony that was like laughter in the dark, I knew a man can hope for nothing more of destiny.

Richard Calder lives in the Philippines. His most recent novel is *Malignos* (Earthlight, 2000), which was expanded from a story of the same title we published last year, and the next will be entitled *Impakto* (also based on an *Interzone* tale of last year). The above new story is the second in his ongoing "Lord Soho" sequence (see issue 154 for the first) but set a couple of generations later than the original piece.

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SPECTRUM SF 3, July 2000

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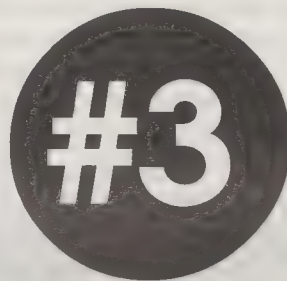
Each issue also has an editorial, competitions and a review column called The Archive. We hope to add a letters column from issue #3.

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Watching, Dreaming, Writing

Tricia Sullivan

interviewed by Nick Gevers

Photo: Dennis Sullivan

Tricia Sullivan is one of the most important new American science-fiction novelists to have emerged in the 1990s; and by making her home in England, she has brought additional lustre to the British sf scene. Her first novel, *Lethe*, published in 1995, attracted immediate critical acclaim, and plaudits from writers such as David Brin and Ian McDonald; she quickly confirmed her stature as an author of bold, intense and thoroughly contemporary sf with a powerful neo-cyberpunk novel, *Someone to Watch Over Me* (1997), and an enormously innovative and entertaining tale of dysfunctional planetary colonization, *Dreaming in Smoke* (1998), a deserving winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award.

NG: You're quite a precocious writer: your first novel, *Lethe*, was published when you were in your mid-20s. Does this mean you were intent on being a writer from the beginning? Or did you drift into authorship?

TS: I was intent on being a writer from the beginning – from about age seven, I guess – but once I got into my teens I developed the opinion that I wouldn't be capable of writing anything worthwhile until I was older. I had a vision of going out there and living this very exciting life, and then by age 40 sort of settling down and having something to write about.

This, of course, is not what happened. Not only didn't I go off and have lots of adventures, I started writing much younger than I'd planned. I think this is because when I was in college I met and lived with Todd Wiggins, who was always working on two or three novels at any given time, and I started to feel competitive urges to do the same. Also, I'd gotten hooked on music while in my teens, but after a few years of messing around with it I saw that there wasn't going to be a good career for me there, and when I left college I decided to turn whatever creativity I had towards an area where I knew I had some ability and

experience; i.e., writing fiction.

NG: You've commented elsewhere on how useful the fact of a publisher's deadline was in completing *Lethe*. How, as a young author who hadn't first published short fiction, did you attract Bantam's interest? And would you recommend deadlines as a general spur to literary productivity?

TS: I couldn't possibly recommend anything to anybody because everybody's different in how they work and how they motivate themselves to work. When I think of the number of Self-Help Books for Writers I've read over the years to no avail, I want to cry. I say this with sincere respect to the people who write such texts – they can't be easy to compose, and as a consumer of such material I'm pretty much a basket case, anyway, because I'm like, "Help, help, tell me what to do," and then I totally reject the advice I get. I think of deadlines as a kind of "kill or cure" approach. Philosophically I'm opposed to the thought of imposing external structures on a process that is essentially internal and unpredictable. But I use deadlines all the same, because without them, I get lost.

In the case of *Lethe*, I must have re-

written the first chapter or two about a hundred times. I could never get past the beginning, or beyond the point of writing little snippets of what might occur in the substantive parts of the book. It would go like this. I'd read what I'd written so far and, depending on my mood that day, I'd either go, "Wow, this is really cool, this is really good," and be so intimidated by myself that I couldn't imagine possibly carrying on; or else I'd be like, "This sucks. I'd better start over," and I'd start over. You've never seen such a rat in a box as me trying to get that book off the ground. Outlining it was like trying to wrestle a wet hippo. I'd just never outlined anything in my life. In school I always wrote the outlines *after* I'd written the papers. It was easier that way.

Publishing *Lethe* goes back to the fact of my living with Todd Wiggins again. Just to lay out the facts, Todd and I were together for about eleven years. He worked for Al Zuckerman at Writers House, a major New York literary agency, and he published his own first novel shortly after *Lethe* came out. While he was at Writers House, he was always bringing home projects, usually thrillers or other mainstream fiction, in manuscript form. I was completely intimidated by the idea of publishing a novel. I'd never gotten a short story published, after all, and I thought novelists occupied some kind of special plane of existence. But when I saw these things in manuscript I kept thinking, "Well, it's not *that* good. I could do as well(ish) as that." So I kept trying to write, and whining about my unfinishable book, and finally Todd just said, "Give me a proposal and shut up already." I gave him a couple of chapters and a synopsis, he submitted it to four or five houses, and within two weeks he had two editors who were interested. It went to Bantam. When I look back on it, the whole thing was really silly. I find it harder to get stuff published *now* than I did then. I'm sure there had to be a major element of luck.

NG: Moving to one of your extraliterary interests: you've been involved in the martial arts, haven't you? This has certainly influenced your fiction, hasn't it, as in your characterization of Adrien Reyes in *Someone to Watch Over Me*?

TS: When I was in my early teens, my brother started training in karate. I mistakenly thought that if I got to be a "karate expert" my parents wouldn't be so over-protective and would let me go out and do things. I started training at 13 and when I was 16 I went to Okinawa with my local school. In Okinawa I was flabbergasted by the tradi-

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Photo: Paul Brazier

tional training I saw, but when I got back to America I ran afoul of karate politics. This is a whole area that is very hard to explain to people outside the martial arts. Basically, in my experience, karate teachers are always doing everything they can to keep their students, to get them to be instructors for free and to spread the system, and to sit on top of the pyramid and rake in as much dosh and prestige as possible while doing the least amount of work. Also, they make a kind of religion out of the martial practice. When I came back from Okinawa, I was as religiously devoted to karate as anybody, but I made the "mistake" of objecting to the instructor's dividing the class into men on one side, and "women and children" on the other. I was prepared to sacrifice my feminist ideals and shut up about the iniquity, but on a practical level I simply couldn't get good training with the women and children and I wanted to train with the guys. I tried to go to another instructor and for that I was brought up on charges, as it were, within the karate organization and kicked out for "insufficient karate attitude" or something like that.

When I started writing *Adrien*, it was out of a deep nostalgia for what I believed I had found, and then lost, on Okinawa. I'd tried going to other clubs and doing other styles, but nothing seemed to have the intensity of the Okinawan training. With *Adrien*, I was trying to recapture that feeling I'd had on Okinawa, but at the same time I'd subsequently become conscious of the fact that all that karate hadn't really taught me how to fight. I'd seen the Ultimate Contests on American TV and realized that a good wrestler could destroy a karate proponent easily. And my confidence in my ability to defend myself was comprised, I now suspected, of more bravado than truth. So I tried to bring *Adrien* into a real fighting situation and make him make his "art" work for him. At the time, I believed the mythos of Eastern martial arts.

However, when the book was in its final draft, I met Steve Morris, and everything I thought I knew about martial arts was totally stood on its head. Steve is an outlaw personality in British martial arts who, although unpopular, is universally respected both verbally and physically for his knowledge and experience of hand-to-hand fighting. Essentially, Steve had already been to all the places I wanted to go, figuratively speaking, and the Eastern legends had let him down hard. When he started to explain what was really going on in martial arts (historically, politically, biomechanically, bioenergetically, psychologically) I realized that I had been looking at

one tiny part of a much bigger picture. My perspective changed radically. In a rush I tried to alter some of the karate stuff to make it more realistic, but as I had already written into the story the concept of karate *kata* as codes for information and Adrien finding some hidden truth in them, it was hard to squirm out of it without changing the whole book. The result represents a compromise that I'm not happy with.

NG: Music is very evidently important in your fiction; what sort of music do you most enjoy, and is it a part of your literary inspiration?

TS: For me, music is deeper and better than language. It's more direct and physical, and because it's a system of thought that isn't tied to the rational in the same way as language, it lets you access different states of consciousness and movements of consciousness. I'm not interested in categories or types of music. I get into what interests me, which could be just about anything on a given day. Practically speaking, I use sound a lot when I work, in that I'll put on headphones and work with the music going into my head on a subconscious level. I don't think about listening to the sound, I don't try to listen to it, I just kind of let it come over me. What I find, personally, is that it shuts out the other noise in my head and helps me to focus. I listen when I'm exercising, too; it's a major motivator when you're trying to squeeze in another 20 minutes of endurance work. These might seem to be quotidian applications, and people who are "serious" about music probably wouldn't consider that to be "real" listening. But it is unselfconscious listening, and sometimes that's better than you think.

NG: Like Pat Cadigan, you're an American writer resident in the UK; and you've impressed Britain's sf establishment, to the extent of winning the Arthur C. Clarke Award for *Dreaming in Smoke*. Is Britain an advantageous literary environment?

TS: Britain has been good to me in terms of providing a serious sf readership. In general, I think, writers get more respect in Britain than they do in the US, which is nice but I do find it a little surprising. Sf in the States seems to be more media-oriented. In the States, if I tell someone at a party that I'm an sf writer, I find myself being told I look like Buffy the Vampire Slayer (which I don't!) – as if that were a logical connection. Here, at least, people still seem to have heard of things like books.

NG: As I mentioned earlier, you



haven't produced much short fiction; in fact, I know of only one short story by you, "The Question Eaters," in *Full Spectrum 5* (1995). That story is very impressive; why (pleadingly) don't you write some more?

TS: Thanks! It took me *years* to get that story right. For some reason, I find short fiction very difficult. You have so little margin for error. You have to know where you're going and you can't really digress. I have kind of a headlong approach to writing, a Jackson Pollock-type attitude, and it doesn't make for tightly constructed short fiction. It makes for weird elliptical things that nobody quite knows what to make of. "The Question Eaters" was rejected several times before Janna Silverstein bought it for Bantam shortly after she bought *Lethe*. All my other short fiction has also been rejected in the major American markets. My ego being as fragile as it is, I've more or less given up.

NG: Do you associate yourself with any particular school of sf writing? Have any particular sf authors influenced, or helped inspire, your own sf?

TS: I'm having to rack my brains to answer this question. I don't associate myself with a school of sf, and there's a lot that I haven't read. I'm not trying to duck the question, but I don't really know what influences me. A lot of my reading was in the past tense. These days, I hardly read science fiction, or any fiction at all (I just can't "lose myself" in it because I'm usually too caught up in whatever I'm working on), and sometimes I don't even remember what I've read unless someone calls it to my mind. When I was a

teenager I read *Childhood's End* which had a deep effect on me, but whether it influenced my writing, I couldn't say. Similarly, I used to read Anne McCaffrey's early dragon books when I was young. I loved them to pieces and I still drag them out in times of severe PMS or flu – but I don't think you'd see much of an influence in my stuff. Conversely, I read *Gravity's Rainbow* twice and tried really hard to be influenced by it, I thought it was so magnificent, but again, I don't think anybody in their right mind is going to go comparing me to Thomas Pynchon!

NG: But a hallmark of your writing does seem to be the reinvigoration of sf clichés, by means both of their novel treatment and their juxtaposition with fresh and surprising textual elements. In *Lethe*, for example, you portray disembodied brains, a hoary cliché, but in an original context (telepathic dolphins, crazy genetic alterations). Is this rejuvenation of genre standbys a conscious technique, or simply an inevitable result of being an inventive contemporary (postmodern?) sf writer?

TS: I'm embarrassed and chagrined to say that the clichés are an inevitable result of being really badly-read in sf and watching too much *Star Trek*. I would like to be able to say I was being postmodern and clever, but I wasn't. I thought that science fiction was about stuff like disembodied brains, so I used them. Sorry. I feel like the Wizard of Oz, exposed in all his puny and pot-bellied glory.

NG: Well, what about a specific area of revisionism: one could see your books as cyberpunk novels, but they always seem to subvert that sort of sf. Instead of conventional ventures into consensual cyberspace, you emphasise telepathic communion, as in "The Deep" featured in *Someone*; and in *Smoke* cyberpunk materials are disorientingly transplanted to an alien world, where they battle to cope. What is your attitude towards cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk forms of writing?

TS: I want to qualify everything I say with the caveat that I don't know very much about either cyberpunk or post-cyberpunk. I've read very, very little of it. After I wrote *Someone* I read this really cool book by Raphael Carter called *The Fortunate Fall* and it made me want to do *Someone* all over again, because Carter's version of mind implants and identity/memory crises was so unbelievably hip. I could see how that book associated itself with cyberpunk and then subverted it by being deeply emotional. Then I read *Fools* by Pat Cadigan and again I felt

like a git. Because I started to see how I had gone barging into an area that other people had already explored, and explored much better than I could, without even knowing it.

Part of the reason I knew so little about cyberpunk was that I had only tried reading William Gibson and Neal Stephenson. I didn't really "get" *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, and when I read *Snow Crash* I thought it was terrific, but it wasn't really looking at the things I was interested in, fortunately, which meant I didn't have to go stick my head in an oven in despair. Instead my work became a problem of trying to create interfaces and things that were reasonable conventions, without getting caught up in the slickness of the hardware or even of the society. I was much more interested in feelings.

Aha! Another classic female moment! As I said that, I realized that I am playing right into the stereotype of soft and squishy female writer. But it's true. I'm just not that interested in the specs of the guns involved. It's what makes people shoot them that I care about. How depressing. Here I thought I was so "different." Excuse me while I go get some chocolate.

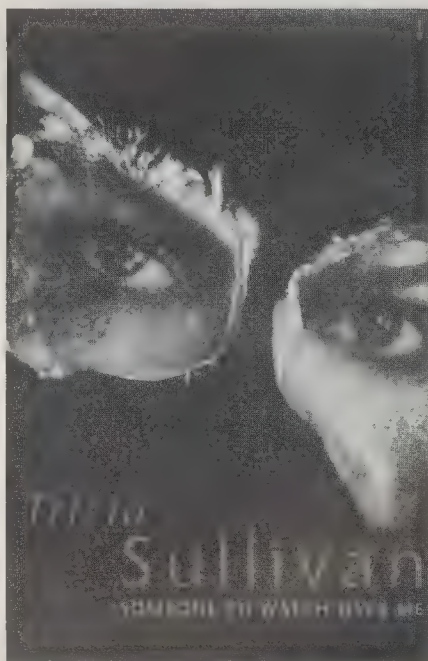
Don't get me wrong. I wish I could write all that nifty technical stuff in a convincing way. I'm sure if I could, I would. But it's not my *métier*.

NG: *Lethe* begins very strongly, and then relaxes somewhat – or at least that's the perception of some of your readers. In retrospect, how satisfied are you with *Lethe*? Do you feel your literary technique has improved in your subsequent works?

TS: Yeah, that strong beginning is because I rewrote it 17 billion times (see second question, above)!! It certainly does relax – and this is the downside of a deadline, because I wrote it in under five months strictly on the weekends and during school holidays and I had to just keep ploughing ahead. The deadline was liberating because it gave me a "what the fuck" attitude that made the juices flow. But I never had time to sit down and read *Lethe* for pace, because it was always too raw and fresh in my head. To this day, I haven't read it cleanly. I proofread it, sure, but I've never read any of my books as novels, as a reader. I'm afraid to. Every time I open one up to any given page, I find something icky.

I did learn quite a lot from *Lethe*, but I think I learned more from *Someone to Watch Over Me*. I had so many different points of view and subjective truths flying around in that book, that when it came time to do *Smoke* I made the conscious decision to stay in Kalypso's head the whole time. This

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created some sags and lags in the movement of the story, where in another novel I might have felt tempted to slip into a different character for a fresh perspective, but it was a necessary exercise because I felt I'd been guilty of writing sloppily in the past and I wanted to place some limitations on myself.

NG: In analyzing your novels, I've been struck by how difficult it is to assign any conventional feminist significance to them. Both Sabina in *Someone to Watch Over Me* and Kalypso Deed in *Dreaming in Smoke* undergo admittedly rather unusual violations, Sabina through the invasion of her consciousness by another, Kalypso through being employed as a captive tissue-culture laboratory of sorts; yet these violations appear ambiguous, even acceptable, in view of their ultimately beneficial, or at least not entirely reprehensible, outcomes. Isn't this in a sense a palliation of rape, and a reversal of the trend towards strong female characterization in much sf of the last few decades? Are you rejecting the sf cliché of the competent, self-sufficient protagonist, in your depiction of women, and of course men as well?

TS: Hmm. I don't think it's a palliation of rape, although possibly this theme could be read as an exploration of pregnancy, as in both of these cases something new and unique is created through a woman's body being "taken over" by another entity. I'm not too sure of any trends in sf, so whether or not I would react to them is hard to say, but since my characters do come from within me without a whole lot of intervention on the part of my intellect, I'd have to say that I'm probably writing these women from out of my own experience. It's possible that I perceive the greatest threats and challenges to my existence and identity to be ones that I cannot hope to conquer or even control. Ones that ultimately have to be negotiated with, maybe even surrendered to.

However, when it comes to what I am up to in this area, I have to say that your guess is as good as mine. Another interviewer recently asked me very much the same question as this and I was totally shocked. Me, boot-wearing, cursing, spitting and ass-kicking *me*, guilty of weak female protagonists?

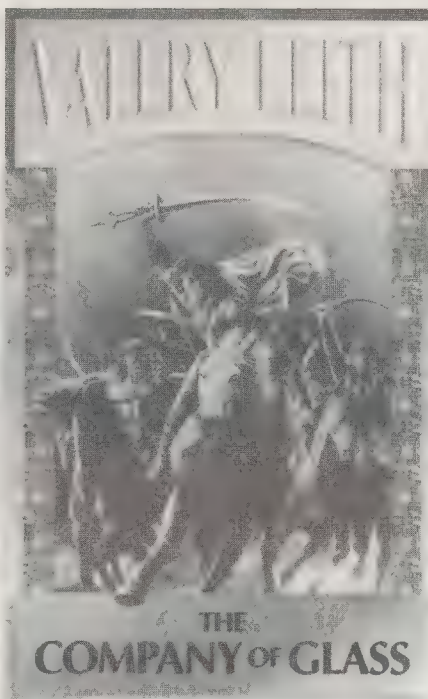
Well, maybe. But it's not so much about sexual politics as all that. I suppose everybody has something that makes them feel helpless, and I get interested in what those things might be and in how we humans react when we are in over our heads.

NG: Your plots involve surprising dialectical reconciliations: the antagonists C and Sabina (in *Someone*) are reconciled in a psychological merger, and through them, both women with Adrien; and in *Smoke* the strange rapprochement of Kalypso and her kidnapper, Azamat Marcsson, is a token of a wider, very odd and very promising, reconciliation between human colonists and the seemingly hostile planet they've settled. Would you identify such transcendent resolutions to conflicts as a major theme of your work?

TS: I do have a soft spot for transcendence, yes. I feel like I'm confessing a drug addiction when I say that, because intellectually I have come to expect nothing of the kind from the larger shape of the world. I seem to spend a fair bit of time shopping at Tesco's or watching inconceivable/unprocessable bits of information about "the world" on Sky News, and that kind of existence doesn't lend itself to romantic ideas about human meaning. But I do think a kind of personal transcendence is possible, which is why in *Smoke* Kalypso (I think) says that a human being is the biggest thing there is. This is arguably sentimental, but in the context of the story in which dreams are made concrete and the language of the mind develops a physical analogue or at least synologue in the surface of the planet, it takes on a wider significance. I mean, I'm on well-trodden territory in saying that the world we perceive through our senses is just a negotiation of our biological structure with its environment, each of which has shaped the other. We *are* the laws of nature. So I guess that counts as transcendence, and I dig it.

NG: But transcendence, an extreme condition, entails existential and perceptual confusion. Thus the altered states of consciousness and uncertainties of identity in your books: communion of minds across species barriers, the merging of minds, the startling oneiric passage at the opening of *Smoke* and the chaotically inaccurate and conflicting perceptions of the people in that novel. What are you saying about the nature of human perception in all this? Do we see, think, and read in smoke as well as dream in it?

TS: We see indirectly, through our senses, which are primed by evolution to pick up some things and ignore others. It makes me feel crazy to try to imagine how another species in another environment might perceive and react to its world. I'm bound to try to imagine it, because the possibility exists, but I don't have the equipment to construct such a vision. So that's



the friction I'm always working with. Wanting to go that little bit beyond the edges of what I can understand, but realizing that the only way to stretch past yourself is to become something that *isn't* yourself. I think that's the point at which things get spooky and interesting for me.

NG: On a lighter note: *Smoke* describes certain groups of people – the matriarchs known as "the Mothers" and as "the Dead," and the



"Grunts," male scientists and technicians – in a very amusing spirit of caricature. Do you have literary targets in mind here, or does this jaundiced standpoint reflect your real-world attitudes?

TS: I'm just playing around. It was such a nasty and unpleasant book, I had to amuse myself somehow.

NG: Are you at work on a fourth novel? What should we expect from your future work?

TS: I know I was a bit gawky about answering the "sf influences" question, but I can say one thing for sure here: my next sf novel is a direct answer to Sheri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* which I read years ago while I was in college. I'm saying this very loudly because I don't imagine anybody will pick up on the influence unless I make a fuss about it, and this is one rare case where in thinking about a story I felt very strongly that I was working off what someone else had done before. Subverting it totally, to be specific!

This is my coy way of saying I'm writing something about gender. Or partly about gender. It seems to be about a lot of weird things. I've been working on it for ages and there are various problems with it, leading me to believe I will only finish this novel if someone actually flogs and beats me and deprives me of food until I do it. (Any takers?)

In my defence, I've been busy moonlighting in fantasy. I needed some dosh, and I've got caught up writing fantasies the past couple of years. Theoretically, they were supposed to be light and fluffy, and also they were meant to finance the new sf novel, but in practical terms, they have eaten up all my time and energy, and they are not as light and fluffy as I'd planned.

NG: This fantasy series sounds intriguing. Can you give any details?

TS: The fantasy is a series called "Everien" under the name Valery Leith. The first book, *The Company of Glass*, came out last year, and the second, *The Riddled Night*, is coming out in November, both from Gollancz/Millennium. The stories are set in a world where the remnants of an ancient and highly advanced civilization cause all manner of trouble for a group of iron-age-equivalent warring tribes. There are strange and inscrutable technologies, unconventional monsters, and warped layers of reality; but there are also swords and quests and magical horses. There will be one more book in the series, which I'm wrestling with at this very moment!

ANGEL *on the* WALL

Catherine S. McMullen

Normally I would not have had much to do with the girl sitting on the garden wall of 10 Pepperbox Lane. Lyndel wore black: black jeans, black boots, black coat and a black cap over long, black hair. Although she was only twelve, the kids at school said she was a witch. Lyndel insisted she was a scientist, but she was like no scientist that the teachers had ever heard about.

My problem had been that Mum and Dad had separated some time ago, and Mum liked to go out with her various new boyfriends. This meant that something had to be done about me. Ten years old is not quite young enough for a babysitter, but is too young to be left alone at night. As far as Mum was concerned, the child-care problem was solved when Lyndel moved in next door. Her mother was dead, her father had to travel a lot, so she was living with her cousins. Whenever Mum wanted to go out to dinner it was, "Why don't you have a sleepover with your good friend Lyndel, Marie?"

I got used to it. Lyndel was pretty weird, but she was okay once you got to know her. In a way she could almost be fun, and quite a few of her experiments actually worked.

Lyndel was on the garden wall as I got home from school. She was wearing wire-frame sunglasses, and

peering intently at everyone who walked past, and writing things in a notebook. Her cat Praetorius was beside her, licking his tabby fur.

"Marie, now *you* look like you *are*," said Lyndel as I stopped in front of her.

"Hi, Lyndel. Are you doing another of your experiments?"

"Yes. Do you realize that four out of every five people who walk past look like something they are not? It's the same for dogs as well."

"What about cats?" I asked, trying to humour her.

"Cats don't walk down paths meant to walk on – do they, Praetorius?" she replied, stroking his fur. "Cats walk where there are no paths; that's how they get to the really interesting places."

"So how can you see what people really look like?" I asked. "Are you wearing magic glasses or something?"

Lyndel sneered. "Magic? Magic is the word people use that are too stupid or frightened to ask questions."

"So am I stupid and frightened?" I felt annoyed.

"You have just asked five questions," she replied. "There is hope for you."

She took off her sunglasses and handed them to me. I

sat on the wall and put them on. The lenses were really terrible, a sort of cloudy, brownish colour.

"The lenses are mica," Lyndel explained. "They have only been taken out of the earth recently, and have never been used to give people false impressions. I had to activate them. After a week or so they will learn to show people what they want to see, but just for now they just tell the truth. I have enhanced them a bit, too."

"You talk like they're alive."

"Not alive, but activated, and very intelligent."

"How did you activate them?"

"I sent up a hydrogen balloon during the thunderstorm last night. It trailed a wire that led to my special mica-activation box."

Balloon. Thunderstorm. Long wire.

"So it was you who drew down the lightning bolt that destroyed you uncle's apple tree last night."

"Yes, well, it was a little stronger than I expected. But bits of it are still alive."

Just then Mum drove up the street and turned into our driveway. As she got out of the car and waved to us I realized that something was wrong about her. Cloudy, distorted, her lips too wide and painted in a false smile, her nose red, her eyes round and staring – like a rather worried clown! Lyndel must have seen my mouth hanging open.

"Obviously not what she seems," she said, writing in her book.

"Mum looked like a clown," I said, taking off the glasses and rubbing my eyes.

Mum now looked normal. She was opening the front door.

"Look, Harry is coming. See what he looks like."

Harry was Lyndel's cousin. He was about her age, but was tall, thin, sad and geeky-looking. He had a sports-gear bag as well as his school backpack. His grandmother had left him some money in her will, provided that he learnt fencing for three years. He got a bad time from the kids at school over all that jumping about in tight white uniforms. I put the glasses on again.

"Cousin Harold, you look depressed," commented Lyndel.

"Life's not much fun when all I ever hear is 'Bums against the wall, here comes Monsieur Le Poof!'" he replied.

"Would you like me to help, Cousin Harold?" asked Lyndel sweetly.

"No! No, no," he babbled. "Thank you, no. Definitely. No." "Why not?"

"Lyndel, there's *nobody* that I hate so much that I'd let you go after them. Besides, only a couple of months more and the three years of fencing lessons are over. I'll never pick up another sword again as long as I live."

He opened the gate in the garden wall and went inside. I had not said anything to Harry – I just sat and stared through the glasses.

"Close your mouth Marie, you're drooling," said Lyndel. "Nice, isn't he? I tried the glasses out on him at breakfast this morning."

"Nice? Nice? Through the glasses he's Robin Hood, Sir Lancelot, and the Three Musketeers, all in one," I replied, reeling off the most exciting, dashing characters I could remember from movies I had seen recently. "So handsome and brave, yet gentle and kind. I can't believe it.

He's so, so cool that it's unreal, he's –"

Lyndel elbowed me in the ribs.

"Snap out of it; you're only ten years old," she said.

I took the glasses off.

She picked up Praetorius and hugged the big tabby to her cheek.

"Ah, you may be right, Praetorious, she *does* need them," said Lyndel to the purring cat. "Keep the glasses for a couple of days Marie, until the mica lenses grow up and start to show you lies."

She jumped down from the wall and opened the gate.

"How do they work?" I asked, getting a bit frightened. "Is it witchcraft?"

She sneered. "Witchcraft? *Witchcraft?* I'm a scientist! Next you will be accusing me of making pottery gnomes, knitting jumpers from undyed wool and making my own candles. I deal in science, not craft."

"But you put spells on some of your classmates and two of your teachers."

"Rubbish, I don't do spells."

"People say you're a witch."

"I study science that looks like magic. Sorcerer perhaps, witch, never! Witches are so lower-class and uneducated, they think in terms of result, not principle."

Lyndel never said hullo or goodbye to anyone. Now she walked up the garden path and pushed at the front door. It clicked open and she went inside. Harry had needed a key. I was tempted to look at her through the glasses, but was also frightened of what I might see.

That evening I walked around the house experimentally, wearing the glasses. They didn't seem to make things bigger or smaller, but some things did sometimes seemed slightly fuzzy. Vegetables and fruit were sharp, but packets all looked dull and uninteresting. That made sense. Packages made things look like they were not. Television was un-watchable once you saw it for what it really was. Outside in the back garden, in the moonlight, the plants were the same as with the glasses off because plants did not pretend. Spiders' webs stood out, glowing red and deadly. They were pretending they were not there, after all.

I was worried about how they worked, though. Just what caused the strange glows that people, places and things sometimes had around them? Could it be the different properties in metal or substance? Glows were light, and light was radiation. Maybe radiation was being changed by the glasses, radiation the eyes could not see by themselves.

Mum's number-one boyfriend David Baker was in town that night, and had come around for dinner. Mum had ordered a lot of things from some expensive restaurant, then smeared some pots and pans with oil and flour and left them beside the sink so it looked as though she had made the meal herself. He usually took her to night clubs in his new BMW, and bought her flowers and perfume, but she was now trying to impress him with her cooking. He always tried to ignore me.

I did not wear the glasses to look at David. I knew that he would not look at all like the smart man in a suit who went around with Mum. His pictures were all around the

house, and lately Mum had been saying, "How would you feel about being Marie Baker?" – then looking really cross when I replied, "Not much."

Mum and David were discussing money and boring stuff like that over dinner, something about selling the house and investing in more houses. I didn't like the sound of that.

"But if we sell our house and invest in other houses, where are we meant to live?" I asked as I was clearing up the dishes.

"You live in a mortgaged house that you own but have to pay off," David said. "Don't worry about it, you're too young."

"But Dad paid off this house before he moved out," I replied.

"Yes, but the capital was tied up and not working."

"But we don't have to pay to live in it."

"Joyce, by the time you're 70 you could have five million dollars," he said, turning back to Mum.

"But you might be too old and sick to spend it – you might even be dead."

"Then you would inherit the money."

"But by then I'll be 50, and I'll have my own money. Why would I need more?"

By now David was getting pretty red in the face. I could see what Lyndel meant about the glasses being "young" and "growing up." Grownups seem to want to believe things that are not true, but kids have to learn to believe what they know is false. I was being like Lyndel's glasses. Mum told me to just stay out of it and load the dishwasher. Praetorious was on the window ledge, so I let him in and gave him some leftover crab in cream sauce.

David was still talking about money and what he was worth. He was probably trying to impress Mum, and he was doing it, too. She was leaning over the table, smiling lots and showing off her breasts with a really low blouse. I think parents should get all of that romantic stuff out of the way before kids are born, because to see it going on when you're nearly old enough to do it yourself is a bit intense. I suppose I put the glasses on to hide behind them rather than see David for what he was, but the sight was still a shock.

His face was somehow longer and narrower, with his skin blurred as if covered in fur. Sparkles came out of his cheeks, like whiskers, and his ears had become distinctly pointy. A rather small wolf or a very large rat. Mum was still a clown, but one of those clowns with a smile painted over a sad face. He started up his laptop computer and showed some tables and figures to Mum, and she came around the table and pressed up against him as she looked at the screen. To me the screen looked empty, with hardly anything on it. Perhaps there was not really much in what he was showing to Mum. They started to giggle a lot. Bad sign. That meant they were thinking about doing what romantic evenings are supposed to lead to. Kids are not meant to be part of romantic evenings.

"Think I'll go to the library, Mum," I said. "Be back about 9 o'clock."

"Take my cell phone, darling. Call if you need anything."

Because it was winter, it was dark even though it was only just after 7 pm. The library was only two streets away, but until a couple of months ago Mum would never have even let me play in the front garden at night, let alone walk to the library. Lyndel was on the garden wall, staring up at the moon as I reached the street.

"You are going to the library," she said as I walked into the street.

"How did you know that?" I asked.

"You are going out, you don't hang out with other kids, the nearby shops are closed, you read a lot, and the library is open."

I was starting to get her measure. Lyndel could seem really incredible, but once she told you how she did things it all seemed pretty ordinary. At school, she didn't tell anyone how she did stuff to those who bugged her, and that had them really worried.

"The glasses are cool, thanks for the loan," I said, because I had been brought up to be polite about gifts, even ones I did not like.

"You should wear them to the library."

"I don't want any of my friends to see me wearing these glasses."

"Why not?"

"Well... because they're a bit big for me and don't go with what I'm wearing. Besides, it's night."

"People wear shades at night to look cool."

"I want to look good, not cool."

"Ah, that is why you look like you are." She slipped down from the wall. "I'll go with you."

"Uh, thanks, but I'm okay."

"Oh no, someone might try to crowd you. I'm tired of sitting at home being nice to people."

I felt the skin crawling on the back of my neck as Lyndel walked along the street with me. In the dark, or at school she seemed a lot nastier than she was around home. I decided to do some research about mica. There were lots of large books full of stuff about mica that I could just about understand, but they were so boring and it was impossible to get anything helpful out of them.

"I might try to find stuff on mica on the Internet," I said to Lyndel. "I could waste David's Internet account and make him pay money for my research."

"You don't like him."

"No, but Mum wants to marry him. The glasses make him look like a rat. Or a wolf."

"Or maybe both," suggested Lyndel.

"I'd rather live with you than him," I said before I could stop myself.

"How far could you wind him up before he snapped?" wondered Lyndel, not taking offence. "Hours in the chat rooms? Downloading millions of files, some with viruses on them?"

"I can't do that!" I gasped.

"How disappointing. Well, perhaps we could use a PC here to do some research."

"But they are all in use," I said.

Lyndel went over and said something to the librarian. After a minute or so the poor woman went white, wrote

something on a piece of paper and gave it to Lyndel.

"I have a password now – we can do some research using one of the library staff PCs," she said, rather proudly.

I started to look up the sites for mica. There were lots of different sites about rocks and minerals, but not many on weird effects mica had on light or the mind. I gave up looking in the scientific records. Scientists tended to leave things that couldn't be broken down into fancy words well alone.

I eventually found what I was looking for in a reference to a popular science magazine that had some stuff about the paranormal. A scientist had had to be treated for minor hallucinations. He reported seeing strange glows around some people and things while doing experiments with mica. It was diagnosed as nothing serious and he was sent home after a quick check-up.

"Ah yes, he saw but he did not want to see," concluded Lyndel. "We are children, we see without realizing what we are meant to see. It's going to be boring when I grow up."

We had just left the library when we saw Barry, and his gang from Year 7, hanging out on the street corner that we had to pass to go home. I got out Mum's cell-phone and grabbed Lyndel by the arm.

"It's okay, wait, I can call Mum to pick us up," I said.

Lyndel shook me off and kept walking.

"Hey, hey, here comes that pain-in-the-arse witch," Barry began, but he got no further.

Lyndel took a strand of her hair, looped it, then knotted it with a hard flick of her wrists. Barry suddenly shrieked with pain and grabbed at his own bottom. His four gang-boys suddenly looked really worried, and one pulled out a flick-knife.

"Make him put that thing away, Barry," said Lyndel ominously. "Unless this knot is undone by my hands only, you will have haemorrhoids forever."

"Do it, just do it!" he gasped, grabbing the boy by the collar and pushing him aside.

We walked past.

"How did you do that?" I whispered as soon as they were out of sight.

"Twisted little boys are easily twisted," was all that she said.

My old suspicion about Lyndel returned. Away from home she was really, seriously horrible to anyone who made the mistake of crossing her. At home, she was clever in the way she dealt with problems, rather than just mean.

When we got home David's BMW was still in front of the house but the lights were off. Lyndel came in with me. The master bedroom's door was closed, but everything else was as it had been when I left. Even Praetorius was still inside, curled up on the sofa and asleep like a tabby cushion.

"Oh no, I hope he hasn't done a pile somewhere," I said, but Lyndel shook her head.

"He uses the bathroom like everyone else," she assured me.

For some reason I wanted Lyndel to stay; I wanted someone to talk to. I could not really knock on the bedroom door and ask Mum if I could go next door for a sleepover, but Lyndel said she would stay. She made us coffee with

Mum's coffee machine, and even though I hated the taste I drank some with her as we talked about sophisticated things. We were sitting at the kitchen table, and as we talked Lyndel began to tap at David's laptop.

"Hey, there's some wicked e-mail here," she said.

"What are you doing?" I was getting really worried.

"Checking e-mail."

"Lyndel, please! Don't annoy him, I may have to call him Dad in a few months."

"I'm not doing anything, I promise. I'm just looking."

I looked at the clock. It was after 9.30, still too early to go to bed. You had to keep some rules and going to bed early was one I *always* kept – no going to bed before at least eleven o'clock. Besides, the coffee had wired me up like a superstore's Christmas tree... times about one hundred.

In a vague attempt at conversation and a small hope of finding out something about Lyndel, I asked, "What does your Dad do?"

"He's an engineer. He works on crystals used in semi-conductors. Some of his experiments have flown on the Space Shuttle, and he might end up going with them one day because nobody else who understands his work is so fit. What does your Dad do?"

"He's a pilot, a fairly good one."

"I've seen him, once. He looks like he is."

"You mean, a bit of a dag? A boring kinda guy?"

"Yes, but for all of that an okay guy. A lot nicer than a lot of prospective fathers."

I agreed. "Yeah, I guess, but he has one major fault or at least in Mum's eyes. He's into steam trains for a hobby, he even has all of those model train-set things. Everyone in the model-train world knows about him. In real steam trains we get to ride with the train driver. Mum, Dad and I used to go on excursions to country towns and he would shovel coal and things like that. Mum thought it was too silly to be married to someone who played with trains, even big ones. She nagged him all the time, then one night she just said it was the trains or her. Naturally, he took the trains. He has me on weekends, so we usually go away on some excursion train."

We kept talking about random things. Praetorius got up, walked over and jumped up onto my lap. He purred very loudly for a few minutes, then looked at Lyndel.

"Oh, why?" asked Lyndel.

"I didn't say anything."

"No, Praetorius did," replied Lyndel. "You are his, now. I can look after myself."

She sounded a bit hurt.

"I... I'm not sure Mum will let me have a cat."

Suddenly Lyndel came around the table and sat next to me, then spun the laptop around to face us.

"Interesting e-mail here," said Lyndel. "It went out just after 7.11 pm."

I read the e-mail. It said: "Hi! Yo Jack, I'll be sleeping in style tonight at 12 Pepperbox Lane, Coburg. Got a live date called Joyce with real-estate potential. Give you the verdict tomorrow, meantime get me the market value."

"Sounds like he's setting up that real-estate deal for Mum," I said.

"In this context, *live* could mean *gullible*."

"What's gullible?"

"Someone who wants to believe nice lies."

"This was sent just after I left."

"So you didn't send it. But look at the prefix on the

RECEIVER: *naomi-wilson*."

"But he called her *Jack!*"

Just then the doorbell rang. I looked at the kitchen clock, and it showed 10.30. "Who could that be? It's really late."

"Let's check," said Lyndel, who was already on her feet.

She reached the front door before I did and looked through the spyhole.

"Three women, and they all look smartly dressed," Lyndel reported.

She undid the safety chain on the door.

"No, don't do that!" I cried. "What if they're burglars – or lawyers, or something?"

"Three women in suits?" laughed Lyndel. "Well, if they are, David can protect us."

"Fat lot of use that would be. He'd probably scream and hide. All right, let them in."

She opened the door. The three women glared at us. We glared back. Not a good start.

"I'm Naomi Wilson," said the one in front. "These are my friends, Suzie Carter and Jenny Smith." She gestured to the women left and right of her. They all looked really cross, like Mum when a date stood her up. "Is David Baker here?"

"He's in there, in bed," I replied, pointing to the door of the master bedroom. "What do you want?"

"It is not for a child's ears," Naomi replied. The other women smiled grimly.

Things got really, really heavy... and pretty funny as well. Naomi, Suzie and Jenny pushed straight past us and burst into the bedroom, screaming some terrible things at David and coincidentally Mum. He was naked, and so was Mum, and they chased him around the house a few times before they cornered him in the bathroom. By then they were ignoring Mum, recognizing a situation they had once been in themselves. There was a lot of screaming, shouting, scratching and occasionally hitting, and in the meantime Mum got on the phone and called the police.

Lyndel sat smiling on the couch, easing the knot out of her hair that was somehow connected to the gangboy Barry's painful medical condition. At last David made a break and ran past us, naked except for a lot of blood and bruises.

Lyndel said, "Wow, cool."

Then the three women in suits ran past after David. He pushed Mum out of the way, grabbed his trousers and ran for the front door. Here he tripped over Praetorius, fell really heavily down the steps outside and lay yelling that his leg was broken. Just then the police arrived.

There was a lot more yelling after that, and Lyndel's uncle, cousins, and quite a few neighbours came in to see what was going on. I don't know as much about adult stuff as Lyndel, but David was apparently still married to the other three women but had stolen their houses and savings. The police arrested David but they had to get an

ambulance to take him away. Mum was really stretched by now, curled up on the sofa and crying. The three women in suits tried to comfort her. I called Dad on the phone and he was around within ten minutes

It was nearly midnight before Lyndel went home, but we decided that I should have a sleepover with her because Naomi and the other two ladies was going to stay overnight and there were only two sofas, so my bed was needed. There was lots of adult stuff to discuss before they went back to Adelaide. Adelaide! That was 800 kilometres away.

Lyndel again, I thought as I got my sleeping bag, pyjamas and travel pack together to go next door. I put Lyndel's glasses on as well. I was going to give them back – I'd had enough of her magic, or weirdo science, or weirdo sorcery science, or whatever it was. Besides, I had never looked at her directly with the glasses on and I was now more curious than frightened. Just what was she? A fox? A cat? A devil?

Something did not add up, though. Naomi had received an e-mail about where David was, and booked the very next flight to Melbourne and called the other two women. I knew about airports and things, being a pilot's daughter. An hour to get to the airport, an hour to reach Melbourne, and an hour to get a taxi to where we lived. Lyndel was on the library PC to the Internet at about 8.15. Naomi could never have left Adelaide so late and reached Melbourne when she did by using a commercial flight. After that, Lyndel was fooling about with David's laptop just after 9.30, so Naomi would have had to have flown over in a jet fighter and parachuted into our street to arrive when she did. It was like Lyndel said, the original e-mail must have gone out just after 7pm.

So who sent the e-mail to Naomi? I wondered as I pulled the front door closed behind me and walked down the garden path in the moonlight carrying all my gear. Not Lyndel, she was not there. Not me, for sure. Definitely not David. Mum, probably, checking up on him. Maybe she was smarter than I had realized. Good old Mum! I reached Lyndel's front gate, not seeing very well in the dim light and wishing that I had just put the glasses in my pocket instead of wearing them.

Something leaped onto the wall beside the gate, something that glowed brilliant white, like a blinding sun made of white snow, something that sat up proudly with its tail curled around its feet, its front legs straight and its head inclined down at me. Praetorius now had wings that were folded up above his back. They were about 20 times his height, and so bright that the feathers could hardly be distinguished. His eyes were like coals dropped in snow, and an even brighter ring of pure light floated above his head. As the brightness increased, I fell to my knees, my eyes hurt, my head began to spin.

I awoke kneeling before Lyndel's garden gate. Praetorius was beside me, but he was just a cat again. The glasses were lying beside me. The mica lenses had been scratched out of them. Praetorius! Praetorius had been in our house after I had left for the library and Mum had gone to bed with David.

A guardian angel! In the five hours since I had let Praetorius in for the kitchen scraps, Mum had been saved from being swindled, David had been beaten by his three wives then arrested, and Dad was back in the house. Mum had been hugging him and crying. What next? Would Mum join the steam-train preservation society?

I looked at Praetorius and said, "Thank you," but all he did was purr. Now I knew it, guardian angels do exist. Just then the front door opened and Lyndel came out. She was looking sad for the first time since I had met her, and she sat on the garden wall. The look on my face must have said a lot.

"So, you know about Praetorius," she said.

"Uh, yeah."

"I'm worried about myself," she admitted.

"Why?"

"You know – what sort of person am I, that my guardian angel would give up on me? I feel frightened."

I got on the wall beside her.

"What did I look like in the glasses?" she asked.

"I didn't look, and Praetorius has scratched them out."

"Maybe Praetorius did that so you wouldn't see me and be frightened. Maybe I have horns and a forked tail. I know I'm so bad that he left me. I don't like the idea of being bad. Only clever."

I felt really sorry for her. She was not bad – just, well, sort of careless when she used really powerful forces. What

are guardian angels for, I wondered. That was it! To guard!

"Lyndel, you're not bad," I said, sitting with her. "Praetorius left you because you need guarding like a fish needs swimming lessons."

"But –"

"Next door was me, with Mum dating someone who looked very, very bad through your mica glasses."

Lyndel thought about this for a while as we sat on the wall, Lyndel me, and Praetorius, all in a row in the moonlight. It was weird. Then she changed. She did not actually smile, but she suddenly looked a lot more cheerful.

"You made me feel better," she said, sounding surprised. "Nobody ever tries to do that."

"Yeah, well, I was worried about you," I said, feeling pleased with myself.

She leaned over and looked past me to the cat.

"Your replacement does not glow or have wings, Praetorius. That had me fooled," she said, then she jumped down from the garden wall and led us inside.

Catherine S. McMullen made her fiction debut, aged ten, in *Interzone* 146, August 1999. She is now eleven, going on twelve, but is likely to hold forever the record of being this magazine's youngest contributor. She lives with her parents in Melbourne, Australia. (Her Dad is novelist Sean McMullen.)

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ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Harry Potter fever swept the world as this *Interzone* went to press. The *Washington Post* devoted 39 column inches to the astonishing story that some brat managed to buy this year's novel before the 8 July release date, when the *Times* ran a review as its lead front-page story. I couldn't resist checking US author Nancy Stouffer's plagiarism charges, and claim to have invented the term Muggles, against the *Oxford English Dictionary* – which lists “muggle” as 1205 Kentish dialect for “tail” and, better still, 20th-century slang for marihuana. Children's Author In Covert Drugs Advocacy Scandal! Louis Armstrong cut a 1926 record called *Muggles*; Raymond Chandler's 1949 *The Little Sister* refers to muggle-smoking. The latter is doubtless the next outrage to be committed by J. K. Rowling's bad guys.

GROANING HINGES OF THE WORLD

William Gibson has been doing ads for Andersen Consulting, informing us that “The future is here already. It's just unevenly distributed.”

Stephen Goldin, with courageous timing, set up a website in the late Marion Zimmer Bradley's name which seeks to implicate her in claimed child abuse of Goldin's stepson by her ex-husband, convicted paedophile Walter Breen (died 1993). If you unwarily select this site's harmless-seeming “Tell a friend” option it generates e-mail, apparently composed by yourself, with subject line “Marion Zimmer Bradley and Child Sexual Abuse” and text “Hi, this is [your name here]. I found this site that talks about Marion Zimmer Bradley's involvement with child molestation, and I felt you should see it.” Definitely a dirty trick.

Harry Harrison gloats that after 16 years in the toils of being optioned, a Stainless Steel Rat movie deal is on, with Jan de Bont directing for Fox. More astonishing to sf fans is the *Variety* news story's remark that Harry is a “reclusive author.” Maybe *Variety* just assumes that anyone “best known for *Soylent Green*” must prefer to be reclusive.

Ken MacLeod reports a convention auction for good causes: “Guy Dawson paid £45 for the privilege of giving his name to a political or religious faction in one of my novels. The Dawson Heresy, an effigy of whose gruesomely-martyred founder and prophet is still ceremonially burned every winter on a certain imaginary planet, may well have been born right there.”

J. K. Rowling received an OBE in the Queen's birthday honours in June. (Also honoured was Josette Simon of Shakespearean thespian fame and *Blake's Seven* infamy.)

Geoff Ryman enlivened a conference at King's College, London, with a talk on UK government web strategies – given on his knees, since he was too tall and got in the way of the projector. His non-PC remark: “I've always wondered what it was like to be Robin Cook.”

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Publishers and Sinners. Ian Watson complained that his *Warhammer* 40,000 game spinoff novels are among the top five most-sought-for books on at least one Internet search service, with eager fans offering up to £50 per paperback, ten times the cover price. The publishers Games Workshop steadfastly refuse to allow any reprint of these books (while continuing to schedule new ones aimed at ever-younger markets), apparently because they've been retrospectively deemed uncanonical and off-message.

Sidewise Awards shortlist for alternate-history sf... Long: Brendan DuBois, *Resurrection Day*. (Yes, just one nominee; the judges could still choose No Award.) Short: Alain Bergeron, “The Eighth Register” (*Northern Suns*); Jan Lars Jensen, “Secret History of the Ornithopter,” (*F&SF* 6/99), Robert Silverberg, “Getting to Know the Dragon” (*Far Horizons*) and “A Hero of the Empire” (*F&SF* 10/99). Special/Life Achievement: Randall Garrett.

Thog's Critical Masterclass. “The punch of a mind light years swifter than most requires space in which to expand and express the starbursts of ideas...” (Anne Born reviewing poetry, *Acumen*, May 2000) “As an asteroid (a kind of giant starship) flies through the stars...” (*Publishers Weekly* on Poul Anderson's *Tales of the Flying Moun-*

tains)

R.I.P. David R. Bunch (1925-2000), sf author best known for his vivid, quirky “Moderan” cyborg fables, died of a heart attack in early June. Ray Gibberd of Birmingham's Andromeda Bookshop, who had undergone two operations during a long struggle with brain tumours, died on 28 May. Joe Mayhew (1942-2000), artist, author and long-time fan famed for deft, witty cartoons, died on 10 June from Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease after a month's hospitalization. He was 57. Joe's cartoons appeared in *Asimov's* and *Analog* besides countless fanzines including my own *Ansible*; he received the 1997 Fan Artist Hugo.

Such Is Fame. Members of the convention “Aliens Stole My Handbag” (don't ask) were polled for a Family Fortunes-type panel game and asked to name a novel by guest of honour Robert Rankin. The number-one response was *The Colour of Magic*, followed by *The Antipope*, *Gormenghast* and “Robert who?”

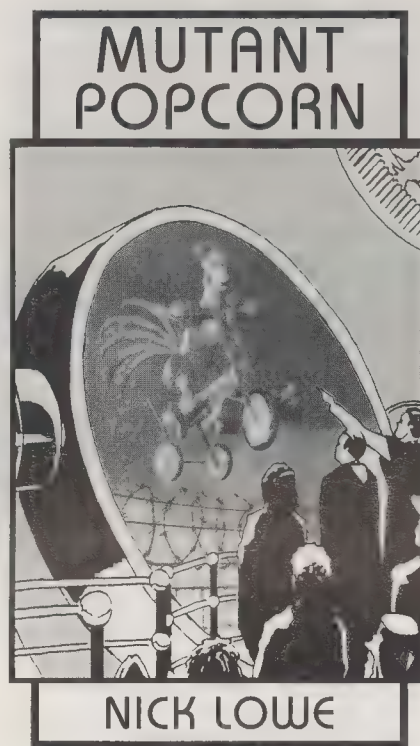
Froth and Bubble. SF author Pat Murphy, wearing her other hat as director of publications at the San Francisco Exploratorium, was able to make the solemn public statement: “There's no way you could injure yourself with a bubble bomb.” This bit of fun for the kiddies (vinegar and baking soda in a plastic bag – *whoosh, pop!*) is believed to be why the Exploratorium website “has been ruled off limits to soldiers at Peterson Air Force Base near Colorado Springs.” (*San José Mercury News*) Oh dear.

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Scientific Method.* “For one, Hackett found a way to find a way to discover how the broadcast-power receivers worked.” (Murray Leinster, *The Greks Bring Gifts*, 1964) *Dept of Eyestrain.* “Her black eyes snapped angrily.” (Carolyn G. Hart, *Summer Ghost*, 1992) *Dept of Non-Fiction.* “Quotation marks of worry cleaved the aging man's forehead.” (Dan Baum, *Citizen Coors*, 2000) “Which illuminates again the nerd underbelly that is an inclination towards the human-transcending and the synthetic-universe preferring.” (Paulina Borsook, *Cyberselfish*, 2000) *Dept of Elementary Astronomy.* “Sodium is what stars are made of.” (Adam Roberts, *Salt*, 2000) *Dept of Seeing the Funny Side* (after an arrow in the eyeball): “He clapped a hand over the puckered socket, and tossed the gore-tipped shaft aside. The deflated eye still clung to it like a rot-ted vegetable on a shish kebab skewer. Humorous fluid dripped down his cheek...” (Kevin B. Eastman & Stan Timmons, *FAKK2*, 1999)

The year's most unreleased film, *Supernova* is an everyday tale of being trapped on a fuel-leaking ship in the gravitational field of a blue giant with a ninth-dimensional cosmic bomb on board and a bio-enhanced psychotic *Uberrnensch* picking off the crew one by one while the hero is marooned on a deserted planet as the clock ticks down the final hours before the sun explodes. Luckily, the crew of "Emergency Medical Rescue Vessel *Nightingale*" (non-nonsense opening caption) are hardened professionals with many missions behind them; and they trot effortlessly through lines like "We've jumped into a low grav field right in the path of that moon's debris cloud!" and "There's some kind of growth on his bone structure, as if his bones were somehow strengthening themselves!", all the while the ship's computer ("I've given it a human personality") keeps up a running plot commentary ("Emergency Distress Signal Received... Rescue Return Transport Deployed... Time Until Solar Nova 3 Minutes...").

Deep-space movies are hard to disapprove of, especially ones as enthusiastically nonsensical as this. But *Supernova*'s brief, belated, and somewhat furtive emergence on the big screen deserves particularly warm welcome, marking as it does the debut of what promises to be a major new directorial name. As nobody has tried to conceal, *Supernova*'s director "Thomas Lee" is the reincarnate form of Alan Smithee, that versatile disconcerting unintelligence who used to possess reputable directors and use their bodies to direct films for which they would later claim no responsibility. An awesome manifestation of studio dumbness in active, pseudo-sentient form, Smithee's own last work *Alan Smithee Film* was widely presumed to have killed him off for good; but the undead have a way of bouncing back reincorporate, and for *Supernova* he's lettered his new name on the capacious chair of Walter Hill.

Not previously one to distance himself from rubbish films, Hill is a fascinating choice to direct, and then to disown, a space movie. As principal proprietor of the *Alien* franchise, Hill has been a seminal figure in the shaping of sf cinema much more actually directing an sf film till now. Yet in his glory days of the late 1970s, he was one of the seminal architects of the modern action film, developing a trademark plot (embodied in *Alien*, which he largely wrote) of a small group trapped in a vast hostile environment where unseen predators whittle them down in a series of gruesome set pieces. Since then, of course, his own directorial output has been



relentlessly routine, which makes *Supernova* actually something of a return to roots, and to the story template he once made his own. Except, of course, that it's not his own any more; and the hiring-and-firing that's characterized Hill's tenure of the *Alien* franchise has claimed the master himself as its exemplary victim. In many ways, this makes the film more interesting than it could otherwise have been; for what distinguishes Thomas Lee's work, like that of his predecessor Smithee, is its enigmatic projection of a text without a text. The Smithee/Lee trademark is the invitation to view the film you are watching as merely an imperfect sublunar copy of a directorial vision that once existed in our world but was suppressed by ill-witted studio hacking. Watching *Supernova*, we're asked to imagine this film as a brutal mutilation of a better one – which nevertheless somehow included the same zero-dimensional performances, amazingly bad space sex scenes, and painfully self-conscious jubbly-flash from B-list actress (unless some of this was added in the Coppola reshoots).

And to a surprising extent it succeeds. Certainly much of *Supernova*'s plotting and dialogue has the haunting quality of having been rewritten from something that once made sense. The omnipresent plot computer seems to have had its voiceover part extensively beefed up, and the brisk pace of the 90-minute release version gives the narrative a rather effective edge of enigmatic ellipsis, as if every second minute has been cut. Yet at the centre of the film-as-released is something

that could easily be imagined as the memory of an interesting idea. The supernova bomb turns out to be a cosmic virus planted by a lost civilization to wipe out competition: any civilization sufficiently advanced to achieve deep-space travel will sooner or later discover one of the artefacts, take it home, and trigger the immediate extinction of their home primary. Admittedly the bizarrely rushed climax raises the sudden suggestion that having your sun explode might actually be a good thing and "move human civilization up to the next level." But in A Thomas Lee Film, such surges of baffling nonsense are merely intimations of a transcendental director's cut too perfect for our world to contain. His disembodied voicemail must be clogging up with offers.

If there are craft awards for overplotting, Gregory Hoblit's time-paradox hitlet *Frequency* is a small miracle of movie engineering, its little insides packed tight with fantastic cogs, springs and coils of delicately ridiculous plotting all designed for one purpose: to fulfil the deepest desires of the Hollywood psyche, the needs that all movie plotting seeks to gratify. For *Frequency* is a film about literally changing your life, in strict accordance with the doctrines of Hollywood narrative mythology – according to which everything in the whole world comes down to your relationship with your father. Its premise, as sleekly functional as it is preposterous, is that you can fix your life *right now* by talking to your dead dad on a haunted CB set and straightening out all the mistakes that will make you such a miserable useless screwup in the present. Since all human misery is the result of avoidable mistakes in your parenting, all you have to do is to nail that engram, get on the time-radio, and get it sorted at source. Presto! Fix your own life in real time, as master of your psyche's own personal digital editing suite! And don't worry if you make a slip and kill your mom 30 years early; while the functionality in this release doesn't include an undo, it's always possible to find a workaround.

As a gratuitous extra, the package also offers the exclusive bonus of instant gratification for moral choice: thus, for example, stubbing out a cigarette in 1969 is immediately rewarded with life-saving extra scenes in 1999 when your character fails to die from "Lung cancer. From them cigarettes." (Camel must have done something really bad to the studio chief to earn all those close-up pack shots.)

No human language can give an adequate account of the glorious fli-grees of daft story twists that make *Frequency* such a feast for the sense of

absurdity. But the end result is all that could be desired, at least in the Hollywood litany of What Humans Want. Our hero's failed relationship with his girlfriend becomes a stable, fertile marriage, and the love of baseball propagates into the third generation – and all thanks to his having had the conversation with his dad that sons and fathers never, ever have except in Burbank therapists' dreams. In a film so starkly mechanical, just watching the wheels turn and the gears spin is sufficient pleasure in itself. To distract the eye from what the hands are doing, the whole time-twisting flim-flam is performed amidst a vast pan-generic megaplot assembled entirely from standard components, including a serial-killing cop, a succession of firefighting set pieces, and heart-hugging writer's scenes about familial love. The expositional devices alone belong in a craft museum: the newspapers glimpsed with adjacent story updates on the solar storms, serial killer, warehouse blaze, and World Series; the broadcast bulletins ("In other news..."); the TV cameos of the movie's physics consultant in two generations of makeup, each time hijacking an interview on atmospheric conditions to waffle on about quantum ('69) or super-string ('99) models of time. And the climax, which involves simultaneous on-air duels between the heroes and the villain in two different times with ripples of paradox propagating in both directions, culminates in the most deliciously preposterous Prepare-to-Die-Ow-Someone's-Just-Shot-Me-in-the-Back moment in all cinema history. It's a wonder anyone could type this stuff up without tears of uncontrollable laughter shorting out the keyboard.

But the miracle is that somehow the necessary straight face is maintained throughout. The ruthless suppression of any sense of irony is sealed with a kiss in the soft-rock end-title song from Garth Brooks (a brilliantly vapid choice), with its inexhaustible supply of inspirational lyrics like "I hear your voice and it keeps me hanging on." And of course Dennis Quaid, an actor

nobody but himself could remotely take seriously, is perfectly cast in a vehicle that captures his own qualities exactly. It's an awesome achievement, a new benchmark in the reduction of movie plotting to an abstract aesthetic of narrative and desires with its own self-sufficient virtuosity, like a baroque concerto, but stupid, and with Dennis Quaid in it. Bliss.

Looking both more and less like a traditional seasonal hit, *Chicken Run* is a poignant specimen of that rare and vulnerable breed, the British summer movie. Fittingly, it wears a huddled, overcast look and an irrepressible mood of impending disappointment. It's hard to wish anything but well for a film pitched so lovingly at people who love film, but it's touch and go whether its dense visual gags and barrage of old-movie references (from *The Great Escape* to *Empire of the Sun*) are enough in themselves to lift it over the wire. Certainly it breaks an awful lot of rules, and not just in its epic perversity as a handcrafted plasticine movie defying the tide of digital animation technology. The characters are insufficiently facialized to make for distinctive action figures; and the overall atmosphere is grim, dark, muted, oppressive, with sunlight and colour breaking out only in the coda.

The feeling of unease grows as the film's thematic web begins to knit. Predictably, like many British films made with US studio money in the expectation of returns, *Chicken Run* takes as its theme the special relationship between the UK and US film industries as viewed from the auditoria of the donor nation. According to this perspective, ours is a backward nation of pre-industrial smallholders on a little fenced island in time (early 1950s, from the look), outside which is the Land of the Free to which all our yearnings turn. To make it past the fences in our heads, we need an energizing

visionary who can mobilize our fowl-like flocks. Homegrown talent isn't enough, however attractively voiced; what's wanted is a professional US star and showman fallen from heaven to reveal to us what real vision is. At the end of the movie, the chickens are still stuck on their own little island reserve; but now the sun is shining, and they're surrounded by little fluffy chicks, so at least they enjoy a high standard of living and low taxation.

And what makes *Chicken Run* such an unexpectedly complex and disturbing little film is the way two rival cultures of war movie have got overlaid on top of this. In *Chicken Run*'s streamlined scale of inter-species evil, free-range egg farming is a low-grade crime that sticks mostly within the terms of the Geneva Convention and the plots of old British war pictures; there are occasional executions, but no systematic programme of slaughter, and the primary aim is sustainable exploitation of captive labour. But contemporary US studios have a rather different notion of what WWII films are, and Mrs Tweedy's programme of industrialization brings a radical shift: not just to meat (which of course is murder), but to production-line piemaking, thereby ratcheting the metaphor unsettlingly up from PoW

camp to death camp. ("Whew!" exclaim our heroes hilariously in the factory-belt set piece: "it's like an oven in here!")

Chicken Run makes a striking statement early on with its

unflinching presentation of Edwina's execution; but this equation of industrial meat production with the holocaust is decidedly riskier stuff, and daringly taste-free in a way that seems more SKG than Aardman. ("It's Auschwitz... with chickens! Can't you see it? Well, then maybe you just need to watch *Life is Beautiful* a couple more times... Ah, so glad you're coming round.") And in a film that itself is so centrally about film, genre, creative sovereignty, and factory production methods, the metaphor is just a little too apt for comfort. Chickens go in, pies come out: it's the system.

Nick Lowe

The Game They Played

Stuart Falconer

There were six of us that day in our little corner of the park. Mac was sitting in his usual place on the bench, the stranger, the new guy, in front of him half crouching, half kneeling, giving him most of his attention. The rest of us stood around, watching, waiting for something to happen.

The stranger had a particular way of shaking the dice, the way he always looked straight at you. It was like he wanted to watch you, see the look in your eyes, watch you sweat in case they came up badly for you. Those bony hands of his, they looked like the middle of a big walnut, when he clasped them together. And always there was that faint smile in the corner of his mouth, as if he already knew how the dice would roll, as if he had already decided.

When he tipped them out, that was the time for surprises. While he was shaking them, their clicking, rattling, it got on your nerves if he did it too long, which is why he always spun it out. So then when he finally rolled them you were expecting something better than thin air. The first time, I thought it was going to be like one of those stage conjurers – the sharp tuxedo, the clever smile, the bit where he pulls something out from behind your ear, or it turns into a pigeon and everybody laughs.

Nobody laughed. We just watched him and waited for him to laugh, to let us know it was his way of joking. I remember he was looking at Mac, and Mac looked at the ground and the absence of dice, then back at the stranger.

"Five." The stranger made it sound obvious.

Mac started to smile.

"Show me that again," he said quietly.

"It won't be the same if I do it again," said the stranger, still with that flicker of a smile, the keen, half mocking look in his eyes. "Probably get different numbers."

"Just show me," said Mac. "I want to see it properly."

Mac is not famous for having a big sense of humour. He can laugh at a joke, as long as it's not on him, but now he was thinking maybe that's exactly the way it was.

Some of us were looking round, to see if there was anybody else who was part of this. We were at the quiet end of the park, nearer the waterfront than the road. Let's face it; it's the scruffy end, where nobody goes much, unless they prefer to keep out of the way of ordinary people, clean people, people who can live out in the open. What was on most of our minds, except perhaps Mac, was that this was some kind of set piece, the sort of thing where there would be others who would slip in quietly, where there would be trouble. We all kept our eyes open, except Mac, who was concentrating on the game.

The stranger made as if he was picking the dice up, rolling them in his hands so we could hear them rattling. He never took his eyes off Mac, and Mac watched those gnarled hands as if he was ten years old and waiting for an overdue birthday present.

"Six."

The stranger's hands were open and he was still looking straight at Mac, who was looking more and more wound up, like a big clock spring.

"Six, you say?" I've seen Mac look like this before and it usually ends in trouble. "It was five last time, and now it's six. This is what people like me, people with a bit of education, what we call inflation."

"Six." I couldn't tell if the stranger was laughing at Mac quietly, behind his eyes, or if he was just waiting for him to join in the joke.

"Show me!"

The stranger pointed at the ground in front of him. There was a piece of old spat-out gum, a dead leaf, a couple of twigs, a small shiny green insect and a spot of bird shit. There were other things, naturally, but those were

the six he pointed to.

Mac moved his hand quickly, a flicking kind of movement. The stranger didn't even blink, but the insect flew away.

"Down to five now," said Mac. You want to count them again?"

The stranger held his hands together and shook them slightly. We all heard the rattle of dice. Mac looked at the ground and shook his head. I heard him chuckling. He was smiling when he looked up again.

"All right. I'll buy it. So what kind of game?"

"Game?" The stranger looked mock-offended. "No kind of game, this. Serious stuff." Then he laughed. Mac grinned too.

"Right. Serious. Whatever you say. So how do I do it?"

"It's all about being able to predict the future."

"The future? I'll be able to tell what's going to win the three-thirty. That kind of predicting?"

"Not yet. Just tell me what number I'm going to throw."

Mac thought about this for a while. He looked around the rest of us, slightly sheepish for a second, as if he was embarrassed to be seen fooling around like this.

"Seven."

"Nice easy one to get into the way of it?" The stranger did the shaking business, perfectly straight-faced. "Seven, you think?"

"Seven."

Mac watched carefully as the "dice" were rolled, almost as if he could see them himself. The stranger's finger moved quickly, counting things on the ground.

"A five and a two. Not bad. You see, it's not as hard as you think."

"So what do I get?"

"Get?"

"I won. What do I get?"

The stranger looked as if he was trying to work out a simple way of explaining something complicated without sounding patronising. He touched the side of his head.

"We remember."

"Remember?" Mac took a minute to catch hold of this one. "Oh, you mean there's more to come. We keep score."

"Something like that. It's all part of the strategy. Want to try another?"

"Strategy. Right." He looked at the ground for a moment, then he smiled. "Nine."

"Nine? You sure? I mean, you can change it if you want to, you know." The stranger looked genuinely concerned, as if nine was more important than seven, somehow. Dangerous.

"Nine. Definitely."

I don't think you could get two people who were less like each other. The stranger had very long hair, black but turning grey, dead straight and tied back with a band made of tiny coloured beads. There was a kind of wiry elegance about him, both in the way he moved and the way he sat still. When you looked into his eyes, his face, there was... I don't really know how to put this... There was depth. He'd seen a lot and remembered every bit of it; he'd watched people and he'd listened to what they said.

Mac was his exact opposite, in just about every way. Short hair, going bald; he was strong as an ox but had no imagination. I remember his father, a big brawling Irishman with a broken nose and a fearsome temper. He hated strangers, anyone who was different from himself. He would have had a terrible time with this stranger and his dice. Mac wasn't violent in quite the way his father had been, though he had very little patience, and once provoked he could be dangerous company. As for being "educated," that was as near as he ever got to telling a joke against himself.

It was interesting to watch the pair of them, the way they did this dice nonsense. Mac was both confused and intrigued. What he didn't want to show was that the thing had him totally fooled. He knew once he gave in – as he saw it – and admitted he didn't understand what was going on, that would be the finish of him with this stranger. Loss of face. He had to make it look as if he knew what he was doing and that it was the stranger who was just messing around.

With the stranger, it was harder to see what might be in it for him. He didn't look like your average con artist, though I suppose that's all part of the act. It seemed to me that it was real for him, as natural as writing his name, or drinking water. You did this business with what he called dice and the numbers came up. Except, there was nothing there. Just the sound of something rattling.

I couldn't work it out myself, none of us could, but Mac seemed to be taking it all seriously. It wasn't clear at this stage whether he coming round to believe the story the stranger was telling him, but at least he was prepared to listen.

We all heard them rattle. No question about it. Then the open hands and the declaration of the numbers, but nothing to see.

"Eight. Five and three."

Mac looked at the ground, trying to see which eight things had been chosen. I don't know what he found, but I certainly couldn't see anything. He shook his head slowly.

"So?"

"One to me." The stranger wasn't actually laughing, but there was a twinkle in his eye. Mac looked at him for a minute or more without saying anything, without smiling. The rest of us got ready to separate them if it came to blows. Something about the stranger told me he would be quick on his feet if it came to it, but I also knew that Mac often carried a knife. Whatever, it looked as if it could get nasty.

"So we do another," Mac said at last. "Six." Mac sounded relaxed about it. The rest of us could breathe easier. I continued to watch what happened carefully.

"Fine. You're getting the hang of things. Easy, isn't it?"

"Six."

It came up six. The next few rounds passed fairly smoothly. Mac got some right, some wrong. He never questioned the count again. They went on doing this, gradually getting faster – like tennis, or some game where people get into a sort of groove, a rhythm. The numbers went all the way from two to twelve. Mac

seemed to choose at random, not deciding until just before he spoke. The stranger glanced at the ground after each throw, paused, counted, said the number, and on they went to the next. Occasionally there was a flicker of a smile on one or other of their faces, like two old friends sharing a joke from a long time ago. The whole thing began gradually to look normal, except that you couldn't see where the numbers came from.

"Let's try something else," said the stranger. They had been playing the game for half an hour, possibly more.

"Getting bored? Or am I winning?" said Mac. The stranger grinned and shook his head.

"There's nothing wrong," he said. "I just..." A train of heavy freight wagons began trundling slowly away from the docks. The noise distracted him briefly. "I thought we could move on to the next stage, seeing how you are getting on so well."

"That a fact?" said Mac.

"Doing nicely, for a beginner." I watched Mac carefully in case he resented the description, but he took it on the chin.

"How much?"

"A respectable total so far," said the stranger. "Close enough to make it interesting."

"So. What happens now?"

The stranger made a move like he was shuffling cards, that slightly intimidating way a real expert handles them, the way that says you're already out of your depth. We heard the sound of the cards too. Maybe he was making the sounds himself, though I never saw his lips move; just that whisper of a smile. I'm not going to stick my neck out and say there was definitely nothing in the man's hands, but if there was I couldn't see it.

He dealt cards for Mac and himself. I lost count how many they got each, but it looked like a heavy hand. Mac seemed uncertain about what to do next. He had just been dealt a hand of invisible cards on an imaginary table, so I don't blame him. The stranger motioned to him to pick up his cards.

"We'll play one open to start off, just so you get the idea. Is that all right?" Mac nodded. The stranger set his own cards out flat.

"I've got a three and a five here," he said. "I pick one up from the pack, a four, so now I have the three the four and the five of birds, which is nice but not remarkable. However, I've also got the witch, and that doubles it. Then I get rid of something I don't need, and that's it for me for this turn." He looked up at Mac. "So, what have you got?" he said.

Mac just stared, too confused to get angry, though that always remained a possibility. The rest of us braced ourselves, but he just shook his head. The stranger smiled.

"I'll help you sort your hand," he said. "Seeing that you haven't played this before. At least, I assume you haven't played this." I don't think there was any intended sarcasm in that, and if there was it went straight over Mac's head.

"Let's see. Five, seven and nine of leaves, and the slave. That's good. If they're in line like that it counts triple.

The ace and captain of knives are worth hanging on to, though they don't score yet. Save them for later. You've also got the seven of stones. There's an advanced play you might be able to make later using that. Another one to hang on to. Now, when you make a play you pick up a card, either from the pack or the discard. Yes, that's right. Nine of birds. Not an important card on its own. You might as well put it out on the discard."

Mac went through all this like a slow puppet. Do this. Check that. Count these cards. Drop that. Birds. Stones. His expression remained blank. Several minutes went by while he thought carefully. If it had been me I would have told this character to get lost, not to mention what he could do with his cards. Mac just sat there, chewing it over.

"Right. Let's play," he said eventually. By the determined look on his face I could see his mind was perfectly made up.

After that they hardly spoke. Play proceeded somehow. Goodness knows what he thought he had in his hand, but Mac was playing it for real. Once or twice, in the early stages, they exchanged glances as he sought reassurance over some aspect of the game. Other than that, everything went as smoothly as it had before with the dice.

My attention started to wander. Earlier, I had been worried that Mac and the stranger would end up at each other's throats. Now it looked as if they were friends for life.

There was a ship, a big one, moving out of the docks. I watched as the tugs guided it, an inch at a time or so it seemed, towards the main channel and out of the river. When I was a kid I used to dream about going out on one of those ships. There were more of them in those days of course, going all over the world. I would sit at the end of one of the piers and imagine sailing into some exotic port, with all the sights and sounds and smells of a real foreign city around me. It couldn't have worked. Things rarely play out the way you hope.

"What do you think?"

"I don't get it" said Mac. "I thought we were playing it straight, just like any game."

"The third stage is the best. Trust me."

"So what are you suggesting? Do we place bets, or something?"

"Not bets," said the stranger. "I never play for money. Very strict rule. It's against my beliefs."

I noted the way he said that. Not I don't believe in it. He said it very carefully – It's against my beliefs. I wondered what those beliefs were. Something about the way he said it, the little smile he gave, suggested they went far deeper than the obvious ones. Religious maybe.

"What we do is we predict how the game will turn out," he went on.

"That's like betting without the money. I don't see the difference."

"How it will turn out, in detail. Not just who won. How many tricks, points, mistakes; who made the strongest play."

"You're joking. This is the first time I've played. Some other day, maybe."

"The third part's the best, I told you. I'll start. I can tell you that I will win, and I will do it with five tricks in hand and that I'll be eighteen points ahead of you. You have made two strong plays and five errors to my three strong plays and one error. We will each make another strong play and you will make two further errors. That leaves me ahead on all counts and the clear winner."

"That's your opinion and I suppose you're entitled to it. I'm just going to carry on playing and we'll see who wins." I had expected Mac to either throw in the towel or hit the stranger. He normally had a fairly short attention span, unless he was getting it all his own way. It looked like the game had caught his interest and he didn't want to give it up, at least not yet.

"Come on and play," he urged.

"I don't think you understand," said the stranger.

"Oh I understand well enough," said Mac. "You just want to mess around, throwing new rules at me all the time. I've met your sort before, never happy unless you are in charge and calling all the shots." I thought this sounded particularly rich coming from him. I looked at the others but no one else commented, so I kept it to myself.

"Just get on and play!" he insisted.

"No, you don't understand," said the stranger. "I have just made my play. I explained how I believe the game will end. To follow, your next play must be a direct response. Tell me how the game will end, in as much detail as possible."

"If that's the way you want it, here it is," said Mac after some minutes of careful consideration. "I am going to win. I don't have much of a head for numbers, so I can't tell you what the score is going to be. We'll find that out when it happens. My old Daddy used to tell me not believe in any future till it was there in front of you, and that's what I think too. But I'll tell you this. I will go on playing and do my best to win. I can't say better than that."

Mac's old Daddy didn't believe in the future because he was too stupid, and usually too drunk, to think ahead.

I thought it best not to point this out though, the way things were going.

"You're going to play and win. That's all. Did I get that right?" The stranger was smiling, that half-mocking spark in his eyes.

"Yes," said Mac very calmly. "While there is breath in my body, I will play you and beat you. That's my move. Now get on and play, damn you!"

I think the stranger wanted to get Mac angry. He just leaned back and laughed loud and hard. It worked. Mac was ready to hit him.

Then something happened too fast for me to catch it. Still laughing, the stranger looked straight in Mac's eyes and Mac screamed. Maybe it was just like creeping up and shouting BOO! but Mac nearly jumped backwards, he got such a fright. The stranger turned back to the game they were supposed to be playing. Shaking his head, and with a faint smile on his face, he laid out what I suppose was a winning hand. There must have been a whole fistful of tricks, threes, fours, pairs; I couldn't follow it. And at the end of it he showed his hands palm-up, as if to say that was him played out.

I think he was about to say something to Mac, something on the lines of "Looks like I won after all," but then he looked up, shocked, startled maybe at something he had seen behind us, beyond our little group. We all looked round to see what was happening, but there was nothing to see. We looked back and he had gone. A trick to distract us. There was just Mac, sitting the same as he had been before, fighting for breath and slowly turning blue.

A train of empty wagons started to roll away from the docks. There was something about the sound they made, a kind of hollow clattering, which carried with it a memory, a shadow of mocking laughter.

Stuart Falconer has published two previous stories in *Interzone*, quite a long time ago: "Familiars" (issue 33) and "Fugue and Variations" (issue 85). He lives in Ponteland, Northumberland, where he has continued to write steadily, and we're pleased to welcome him back to these pages.

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All it takes is a little imagination!

the Confessional

Zoran Zivkovic

The deep, harsh coughing that came from the other compartment of the confessional sounded almost like a distant growl.

The priest started in confusion and raised his eyes towards the gap in the partition that separated his cubicle from the area where the faithful sat to confess. Through the slanted wickerwork that served as a semi-transparent screen, he detected the outlines of a heavy-set man. He hadn't heard him enter because he had been asleep. He had secreted himself in the confessional for that specific purpose, not because he was waiting for a penitent. Here, this failing of his was least noticeable. It would not do to have a visitor catch him asleep in the open part of the church.

His conscience did not bother him overly on account of this sin. He found partial justification in his advanced age, which enhanced the periodic temptation to sleep during the day, particularly in the middle of the afternoon when the church was very peaceful. But the faithful were equally to blame. If there were more of them, if they had not thinned out so much, he would not have had time for this improper repose. When he'd come to this parish many years ago as a young priest, the situation had been completely different. At that time he would never have been left alone in the church for so long. But now a secular age held ruthless sway. Recently, there had even been days when not a single person crossed the church's threshold.

There was one more extenuating circumstance that mitigated the sin of sleeping in the confessional. Whenever he felt his eyelids close, he would not simply go through the thick, dark-red velvet curtain as if into a sleeping berth; rather he would go with the worthy intention of reading – although once he drew the curtain it

was rather dark inside, at least for his eyesight which was already quite poor.

In the beginning he had taken the Bible with him as the most appropriate reading material for such a context. But since he never got beyond half a page before sleep engulfed him, that seemed some sort of sacrilege, so he came to substitute other, less holy works for the sacred text. That, to be sure, did not seem to be the solution most respectful to God and His house either, but since this reading was of equally brief duration, the offence was not very great. In any case, he had never been unduly strict in granting absolution to others, so why be harsh to himself?

Startled out of his sleep, he forgot for a moment that there was an open book in his lap. When he twitched, it slipped and fell to the floor landing with a dull thud. He quickly bent down, picked it up and tucked it under his mantle. There was no way the visitor in the other compartment could have seen it, of course, yet he suddenly felt like a boy who has been caught looking at indecent pictures. The book that had for quite some time been his companion whenever he withdrew to the confessional for his afternoon nap was not indecent in the slightest; at least, not to judge by the few early pages that he had managed to read. Even so, its title – *Impossible Encounters* – seemed rather inappropriate for the Lord's house.

"I hear you, my son," he said, after clearing his throat. He wondered if he knew the man. Only a few still confessed more or less regularly, and he could easily recognize each of them by voice.

"Did I come at an inconvenient time?" It was the deep, velvety voice of a man somewhere in his middle years. He had never heard it before.

"No time is inconvenient to visit the church. God's ear

is constantly receptive to those who would speak to Him. When was the last time you confessed, my son?"

The answer from the other side of the window was not immediate, as though the visitor was intently searching through his memory. "A very long time ago," he said at last.

"That is not good," replied the priest with mild reproach in his voice. "The soul must not endure the weight of accumulated sins for very long. Confession brings release and forgiveness."

"There can be no forgiveness for my sins," said the visitor in an even, casual voice, as though stating a truism.

"Certainly there is. God has infinite mercy. There is no sin that will not be forgiven if one is sincerely penitent."

"Yes, there is. My sins certainly will never be forgiven. But it makes no difference. I'm not at all sorry for them."

"Do not speak like that, my son. Everyone cares whether their sins will be forgiven. Do you want your soul to end up in Hell?"

"Why not? It's not as bad as people think."

The priest turned his eyes towards the bulky figure in the neighbouring compartment, even though he could still see nothing distinct through the dense wickerwork.

"It's not bad in Hell?" he repeated slowly, emphasizing each word. "It's terrible even to think of something like that, let alone say it. Are you at all aware of what you have just said, my son?"

"Perfectly aware. I know from my own experience. I just came from there."

"Where did you come from?" the priest asked softly, after a short pause.

"From Hell."

The priest shook his head. Here was yet another deplorable offspring of the secular age. He had already met others like him in this place. It was not enough for them to be non-believers; they came to the church, specifically, to blaspheme. But he knew how to handle them. It was for just such lost souls that he should fight the hardest. That the man had come here at all showed that all was not completely lost.

"No man has ever returned from Hell," he said didactically, like a teacher pointing out a simple, obvious truth to a backward child. "The Tempter would never allow it."

"He wouldn't, I agree. But that doesn't apply to me."

"Oh? Why not, if you please?"

"Because I am not a man."

The shroud of afternoon silence suddenly settled on the confessional. So this is what it's all about, the priest thought gloomily. Before him was not just an ordinary, contumacious non-believer, but one of those poor wretches whose clumsy wrestling with matters of faith had upset their minds. He hadn't met one of that kind in a long time, and they usually identified with the Saviour. As far as he could remember, this *soi-disant* Devil was a personal first for him. So he had to proceed carefully, without ill-mannered contradictions, yet firmly. In the end he might succeed in bringing the man to his senses, though it was certainly not going to be easy.

"So, that's it," he replied with studied calm, as if this was an everyday encounter. "You are the Tempter himself, if I understand correctly. He is the only one who is

allowed to leave Hell."

The head on the other side of the wickerwork nodded briefly. "You understand correctly."

The priest brushed the tips of his fingers across his wrinkled brow and sighed. "Very nice, but there is one problem. The Tempter would never dare cross the threshold of God's house."

"You think not? That is only one of the many prejudices against me. It is here that I have always felt most comfortable."

"Strange. How is it, then, that no one has ever seen you? It would be hard for your manifestation to pass unnoticed."

"Manifestation? Oh, the tail, horns, hooves, goat's head and all the rest? That is all pure nonsense, of course. No one notices me because I look quite ordinary, unassuming. Like you, for example."

The priest squinted his eyes to sharpen his vision a little, but the figure on the other side of the window still presented only a vague, incomplete outline.

"If you look quite ordinary, how can you convince people that you are who you make out to be? Couldn't just anyone appear and claim to be the Tempter?"

"They could, yes. That even happens from time to time. But it doesn't work for long. Sooner or later they have to offer proof to support their claim."

"And you can offer that proof?"

"Of course."

"That might be, for example, an infernal fire that suddenly breaks out in the middle of the church, with all manner of freaks and monsters streaming out of it? Or maybe the stone floor would split asunder, revealing a chasm that leads straight to your red-hot throne?"

The visitor did not reply at once, and the priest thought he might have gone too far. If he wanted to help the poor man, he shouldn't appear to be making fun of him.

"It would not be anything so unrefined, so primitive, of course," the deep voice retorted from the neighbouring compartment. "There is no need for that. Such ideas about me serve only to arouse needless fears in the ignorant. There is much more subtle and convincing proof."

"Would you perhaps show me some?"

"With pleasure."

Somewhere on the opposite side of the church, near the entrance, came the soft tapping of footsteps. The priest's trained ear told him it must be a woman, probably young, heading towards one of the last rows of benches. She sat down and immediately started to pray.

When everything fell silent once again, the visitor continued. "Let me ask you the same question you asked me at the beginning. When was the last time you confessed?"

"Me? I confess every day. If I didn't, how could I have the right to hear the confessions of others?"

"You confess to yourself, I assume, since you are the only priest in this parish?"

"That's right. My conscience is my best confessor. I can't hide anything from it."

"Your conscience, yes. But there are two pitfalls with regard to your conscience. First of all, it can be very lenient, very indulgent. It doesn't bother you too much

that, for example, you sleep in the confessional."

I must have been snoring, the priest thought. There's no other way he could have found that out. He came in and heard me snoring. I'll have to do something about that.

"Falling asleep in the confessional once is only an ordinary human weakness, and no heinous sin. I feel remorse, of course."

"Just once?"

The priest squinted. Somehow, he had lost control of the conversation. Usually he was the one to ask such questions here.

"All right, it might have happened a few other times. But I do not claim to be a perfect saint."

"Although you might be able to make that claim, considering the second problem with your conscience."

"Second problem?"

"Yes. Your conscience can be rather forgetful. If something doesn't please it very much, if it has a hard time finding justification for something, it has a tendency to discard it, to pretend it never happened. A real confessor should never act like that, wouldn't you agree?"

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand," the priest admitted after a short hesitation.

"It might be clearer to you if I explain it by means of an example. What would your conscience do if you were oppressed by feelings of guilt for the loss of two lives? Would it constantly remind you of that, make your life unbearable, or would it prefer to push the whole thing under the rug?"

The priest felt something tighten in his throat. Who was this man? Why had he come here? What did he want from him?

"I don't know. I can't even imagine that. I am not haunted by feelings of guilt for the loss of two lives."

"That is obvious. Although you should be. A conscience that is inclined to forget can still grant you forgiveness, but that doesn't count for very much, I'm afraid. There is another, much more important forgiveness, and nothing is forgotten there. It remembers everything and takes everything into consideration. Every tiny little thing."

"What are you talking about, my son?"

"I think you know perfectly well what I'm talking about. Your conscience does not really forget, it merely represses things. But that works only until someone reminds you of what you have repressed. As I am doing right now."

"Reminding me of what?" Even though the priest has tried to keep his voice firm, it starts to quiver.

"Of the girl who drowned, jumping off the bridge. Five months pregnant. After finding out that the father of her child, a young priest she had fallen in love with, would not keep his promise. He would not renounce his vows for her."

The sound of footfalls came once again from the entrance to the church. The young woman had finished her short prayer and was now leaving. She walked with quick steps, hurrying somewhere.

The priest could find no words for a while, staring dully at the thick, dark pleats of the curtain in front of him. At first he wanted to protest, to deny this terrible accusation, to challenge the identity of the large figure in the neighbouring compartment. But he did not. There would be no

sense in that. The memory, suddenly freed from the deepest, darkest corner of his mind, washed over him as violently as the icy water into which the girl had plunged, so long ago. Not only had he turned his back on her, he had been unable to attend the funeral. The church does not give shelter to suicides. They are not even given a place in the cemetery. He never found out where she was buried.

No one ever suspected that he was to blame for the girl's demise. They had taken great pains to keep their relationship secret, and she had left no letter of farewell in which she might have accused him, thus making his infidelity all the worse. He remained blameless in the world of men, but certainly not before his own self. After great torment, he had finally repressed the memory, yet he knew quite well it was only temporary, that a true settlement of accounts awaited. Now the time had come. The Tempter had come to claim his due. The priest had no right to expect mercy for what he had done. He actually did not even want mercy. There was only one place for his soul.

"So Hell isn't as bad as people think?" he said at last, in a barely audible voice.

"It isn't. But you won't have the chance to find out for yourself."

"What do you mean?" He was just about to add the usual "my son", but he stopped himself at the last moment.

"Your soul will go to Heaven."

The priest raised bewildered eyes towards the window, even though by now he knew he would never see his interlocutor any better.

"How could such a terribly sinful soul as mine go to Heaven? That certainly cannot and must not happen!"

"But it will nonetheless. I will make sure of it."

"Why? I don't understand –"

"What benefit would I get from your soul? Almost none. Hell is already packed with sinners like you. You might even say we're overcrowded. Whenever I take a new lost soul, I'm only doing God a favour. I relieve Him of what He doesn't like. I take a bad creation out of his sight, so He can maintain the illusion that everything He's done is flawless. Why should I do that? Why should I play into His hands? We are opponents, not allies, right? I should do everything I can to injure Him, to remind Him constantly that the world he has created is imperfect. And what better reminder than to surround Him with the worst of sinners?"

"But He will never allow that."

"He will. He will have no choice."

"God will have no choice?"

"Yes. He's not quite as almighty as people think. For example, He could never exile from Heaven a soul that knows nothing of its sins, regardless of how great they are. Sending such a pure soul to Hell would be infinitely unjust. And God is proud of His justice, right?"

"I am perfectly aware of my sin."

"Yes, but not for much longer. That is why I came here."

"Why?"

"To remove your memory of the sin you committed."

"I don't want to forget it."

"What was the repression you resorted to until now?"

Another form of oblivion, right? But incomplete. Now I will give you perfect, complete oblivion. You will no longer remember anything that might burden you. Everything will be permanently erased. No one will be able to convince you that you have committed any sin whatsoever. When you stand before God, your soul will be the incarnation of purity. You actually haven't the slightest reason to complain. The gates of Heaven will be open to you. What else did you dare hope for that could be any nicer? Although, to tell you the truth, I don't envy you very much."

The priest quickly rose from his seat in the narrow compartment. He suddenly felt enclosed in an upright coffin.

"You must not do that! I must go to Hell! That would be terribly unjust –"

"Probably. But I am sure you understand that such considerations carry no weight with me."

The priest reached for the curtain. He did not know what he wanted to do. It was an instinctive move, a feverish attempt to find a retreat, to escape somehow from the trap in which he had fallen. But his hand never touched the velvet. It sagged next to his body, which collapsed back onto the chair. The drowsiness that suddenly engulfed him was not his usual afternoon slump, rather something very deep, something he had never felt before. It had to start at once, he didn't even have the strength to open his book, let alone read a few lines. His eyes

closed by themselves and his head drooped on his chest.

If he had any dreams, he could not remember them when he woke up. He remained sitting there a few moments, gathering his wits, and then pushed aside the curtain and left the confessional. There was no one in the church. He always felt refreshed after this short rest, but what now filled him was not just renewed vigour. The thought crossed his mind that this was the spiritual state in which it would be most suitable to stand before God: tranquil, at peace with the world, with an unblemished conscience. Like the righteous. He turned slowly towards the aisle between the rows of benches to greet the light pouring from the entrance.

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic

Translation edited by Chris Gilmore

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Zoran Zivkovic has been working on a sequence of short stories, to be published as a small book called *Impossible Encounters*, and the above is the fourth of them we have published, the previous titles being "The Window" (issue 152), "The Cone" (issue 155) and "The Train" (issue 157). He lives in Belgrade.

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After reading the recent interview with Harlan Ellison (issue 156), some readers of *Interzone* were upset because he was not asked about *The Last Dangerous Visions* – his famous, long-delayed anthology of original science fiction stories. As it happens, at a 1997 conference, I attended a question-and-answer session with Ellison when precisely that question came up, and I can describe how he responds. First, he looks *very, very* displeased; then, in a tone of voice that noticeably fails to inspire confidence, he sighs and says, “Well, maybe the first volume will come out next year.”

Needless to say, the first volume of *The Last Dangerous Visions* did not appear in 1998, just as it has failed to appear in every year since 1973, its original announced date of publication. Most people have understandably come to believe that *The Last Dangerous Visions* will never be published, although an occasional report surfaces about the book, and although Ellison has never publicly acknowledged that the project is dead.

Now, when a highly publicized and eagerly anticipated book fails to appear, one would expect extensive discussions about its unexpected absence; yet people in the science fiction community have been strangely reluctant to talk about *The Last Dangerous Visions*. It has been intimated that any criticism of Ellison for failing to publish a book promised to readers almost thirty years ago will result in angry phone calls, threats, and/or lawsuits. But I cannot take these reports seriously, because expressing a personal opinion about matters of public record is a protected constitutional right in America, and no one as savvy as Harlan Ellison would be foolish enough to undertake or sanction any actions against someone who is only exercising a protected constitutional right.

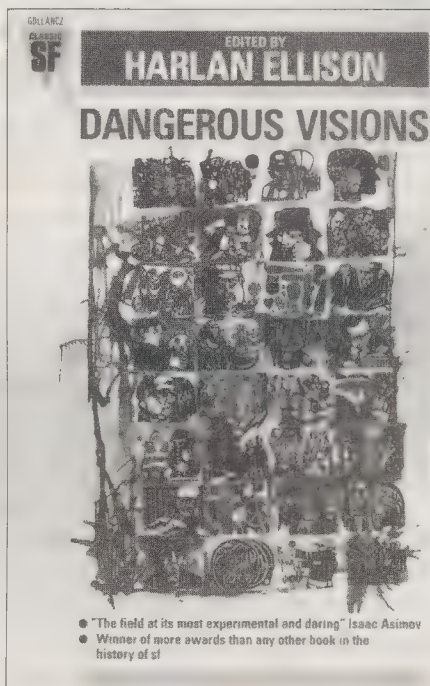
Before I express a personal opinion about *The Last Dangerous Visions*, however, I will emphasize the following, just to make everything perfectly clear: I have no information about this book and its contents beyond what is in published reports; what I will say is purely a matter of idle speculation, from which no rational person could draw firm conclusions; and I commit these speculations to print with no malicious intent, but only because I regularly publish commentaries on science fiction, and I can't think of anything else to write about at the moment.

So, let us confront the blindingly obvious question: why hasn't *The Last Dangerous Visions* appeared in print? We know, from various accounts, that Ellison long ago assembled more than enough stories to fill a hefty volume.

September 2000

The Anthology on the Edge of Forever

Gary Westfahl



The authors said to be represented include luminaries like Alfred Bester, Michael Bishop, Anthony Boucher, Octavia E. Butler, Orson Scott Card, Jack Dann, Avram Davidson, Gordon R. Dickson, George Alec Effinger, Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett, Harry Harrison, Frank Herbert, Anne McCaffrey, Vonda N. McIntyre, Michael Moorcock, Robert Sheckley, Clifford D. Simak, Bruce Sterling, A.E. van Vogt, Ian Watson, and Jack Williamson. Several publishers have committed to publishing the volume, only to withdraw after endless delays.

Christopher Priest, in his self-published commentary *The Last Deadloss Visions*, leans toward the theory that Ellison, having established the policy of writing lengthy introductions to every story he publishes, can never quite manage to finish the innumerable introductions that *The Last Dangerous Visions* would require and/or can never quite manage to rewrite all of the already-written introductions that have become hopelessly outdated. The evidence for this theory is that in the 1970s, whenever Ellison announced the impending publication of the volume, he always declared that the only task remaining before putting the manuscript in the mail was finishing the introductions. So, Priest suggests, the volume never appeared because Ellison never completed the introductions. A second, related theory is that Ellison is too much of a perfectionist: determined to make *The Last Dangerous Visions* the greatest science fiction anthology ever published, he keeps delaying the project in order to add one more telling insight to an introduction, to eliminate one irritating flaw in an otherwise excellent story, or to find the one additional masterpiece that will permanently enshrine the collection as a major event in the history of science fiction.

As noted, I have no facts upon which to base an opinion, but neither theory really accords with what I know about writers.

Regarding the first theory: to any experienced writer, writing an introduction isn't difficult at all, compared to the genuine agony of writing a story; it is simply a chore. One can follow a formula: the editor first discusses personal experiences (if any) with the author in question, provides some basic biographical data (or quotes from the biographical data provided by the author), and concludes with a few remarks about the story that follows. A passable introduction along these lines could be churned out in less than an hour. Given Ellison's indisputable energy and productivity, it is hard to believe that this project has been left in limbo for decades because he can't finish writing some introductions.

Regarding the second theory: if I

were an editor who had gathered a group of superlative stories inarguably demonstrating my editorial talents, I would want to rush them into print as quickly as possible, to immediately garner all the praise I was due. I couldn't stand the thought of waiting 20 years, or 30 years, to proudly show the world the fruits of my labours, even if there were a few rough edges here and there. Ellison's authors would feel the same way: if I had given him one of my best stories in 1970, and he still hadn't published it ten years later, I would remove the story from Ellison's control and publish it elsewhere, no matter how difficult the process of disentanglement proved and no matter how angrily Ellison reacted.

In fact, when prominent authors included in *The Last Dangerous Visions* are asked about their contributions, they typically respond that they consider the story in question to be one of their lesser efforts; more than one author has said that if their story was actually about to be published, they would take steps to prevent its appearance. And this suggests a third theory about *The Last Dangerous Visions*, which should have been the first theory considered.

After all, when a manuscript isn't published, there are many possible reasons, but any inquiry would always begin by pondering the most logical explanation, the most likely explanation, the default explanation, which is that the manuscript isn't worth publishing.

Perhaps, in other words, what Ellison has been withholding for decades is not a collection of masterpieces, but a big pile of crap. That would certainly explain why Ellison doesn't want to publish it, why most participating authors have complacently accepted its non-appearance, and why publishers keep abandoning the project. Of course, given the stellar line-up of authors known to be contributors to Ellison's volume, many will find this theory laughable; yet in my opinion, it is the theory that best fits the available information.

As an imaginative exercise, I will speculate as to how this situation might have developed. First, let us return to the year 1968, when Larry Ashmead of Doubleday first persuaded Harlan Ellison to produce a sequel to the award-winning and much-lauded *Dangerous Visions* anthology. Blessed with a huge advance, and anxious to make this second volume bigger and better than the first, Ellison begins to collect stories. In an exuberant mood, let us suppose, he buys some excellent stories, some not-so-excellent stories, and more than a few out-and-out

stinkers. He buys mediocre stories from well-known writers because he wants their names for their marquee value; he buys mediocre stories from unknown writers because he wants to encourage new talent. He buys all the stories that we have heard of, and large numbers of stories that we have never heard of. He buys far more stories than he is budgeted for, and far more stories than he could possibly publish.

Eventually, after another nagging phone call from Ashmead, he concludes that he really must put something together. So, he gathers together most of the excellent stories, salted with a few of the not-so-excellent stories and stinkers, and presents the world with *Again, Dangerous Visions*, which is received favourably, though not quite as enthusiastically as its predecessor.

Now, as this hypothesized scenario continues, Ellison faces the task of assembling a third anthology from a generally unimpressive stack of leftovers, and he knows that what he has to offer cannot begin to match the high expectations created by the previous two volumes and his own celebratory hype. So, he hesitates. He contacts more authors, and purchases more stories, in an effort to bolster the overall quality of his material. He lets the other manuscripts sit, hoping against hope that the lousy stories he wishes he had never bought will somehow start to look better with time, or that he will suddenly figure out how to revise a loser into a winner, or that some pretext will emerge for jettisoning some of the weaker items in his collection. Yet the delays only make matters worse, as most of the remaining stories that Ellison truly cherishes gradually drift away. So, this proud man hesitates some more, enduring the irksome and ever-increasing grumbling about the volume's absence because the alternative – publishing an anthology that is embarrassingly inferior to his previous efforts – is even worse.

All of this, I emphasize yet again, is only speculation, but in the absence of definitive data, critics must be forgiven if they prefer the explanation that provides the best story. And the story I have just outlined strikes me as far more satisfying, and far more poignant, than the story of an obsessed perfectionist, or the story of an anthologist who just can't bring himself to finish writing a few introductions.

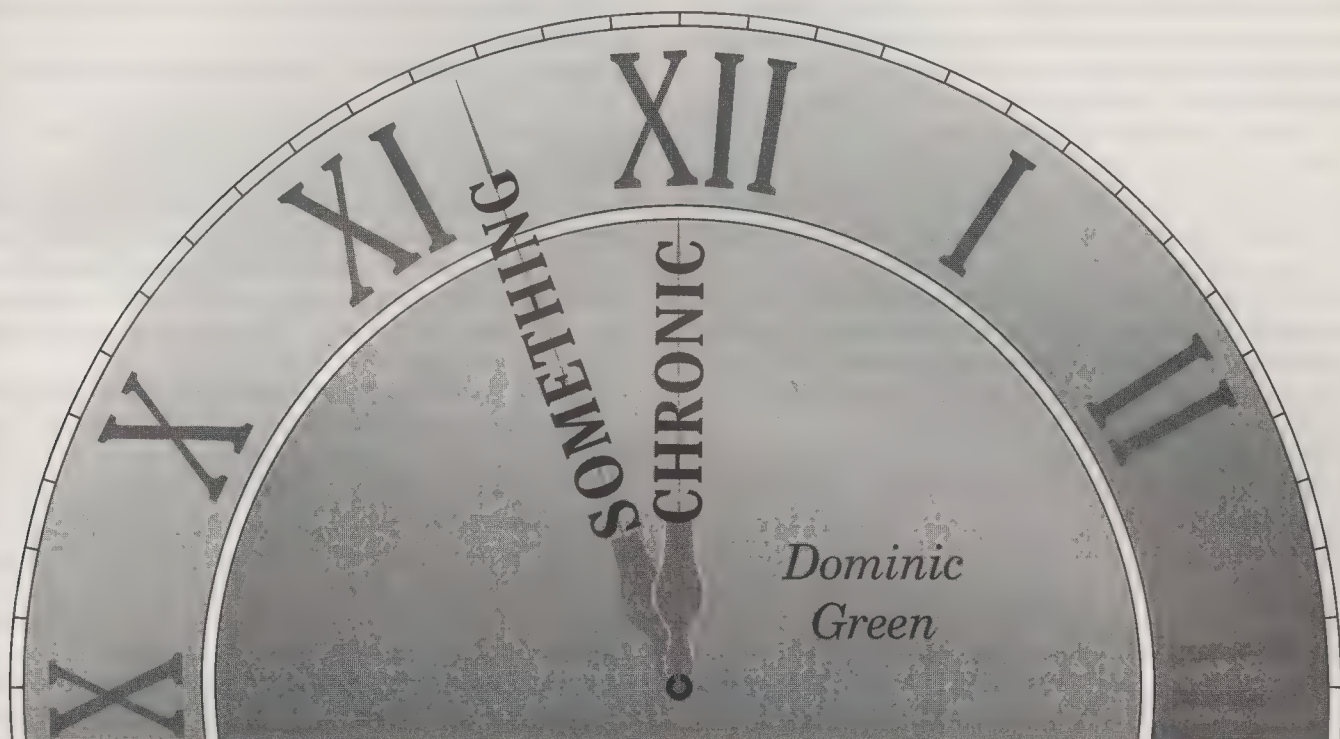
There is a broader lesson here. During their lifetimes, all authors choose to publish certain of their works, and choose to leave certain of their works unpublished. In a few prominent cases, they have chosen not to publish

some excellent stuff: Emily Dickinson wrote wonderful poetry that she inexplicably kept to herself, and E. M. Forster suppressed a wonderful novel, *Maurice*, because of its explicit homosexual content. In the vast majority of cases, however, we find that major authors who have chosen to keep certain works from appearing in print have chosen wisely, as evidenced by dreary streams of inferior posthumous publications foisted upon a gullible public by greedy heirs or misguided scholars. So, when we hear about the unpublished manuscripts of our favourite authors, it would be foolish to demand their immediate publication when the most likely result would be extreme disillusionment. Did you know that Robert A. Heinlein completed a novel in the early 1970s, decided that it wasn't worth publishing, and put it back in his trunk? I do, but despite my fondness for Heinlein, based on the quality of a few of the later novels that he did publish, I have absolutely no desire to read the novel that he could not bear to publish.

So, unlike other commentators who have addressed this topic, I will not conclude by calling upon Ellison to finally complete and publish *The Last Dangerous Visions*. The non-appearance of this volume should not be attributed to Ellison's irresponsibility or lassitude; rather, it is simply his choice. Harlan Ellison has *chosen* not to publish this volume; and, since he is an intelligent man, we should surmise that he has chosen wisely, and we should respect his decision. I have absolutely no desire to read the anthology that Ellison cannot bear to publish.

Instead of chastising the man, then, we should perhaps be praising Ellison for the tremendous services he has performed for the science fiction community. First, he has possibly seized some inferior stories by noteworthy writers and kept them out of sight, so as to prevent their many fans from being disillusioned. Second, rather than wasting his time vainly struggling to make a probable sow's ear into a silk purse, he has wisely devoted himself to producing a steady stream of memorable new stories and articles, overseeing the republication of his classic works, providing provocative commentaries at scores of conventions, and offering his behind-the-scenes guidance to the creators of two worthwhile television series, the revived *Twilight Zone* and *Babylon 5*. So the best way to answer my initial question – why hasn't *The Last Dangerous Visions* appeared in print? – may be: because Harlan Ellison has had better things to do with his time.

Gary Westfahl



There was something odd about Number Thirteen today.

He couldn't quite put his finger on it, though he walked past the house, and turned round, and walked past the house again, checked the number of visible walls and floors and ceilings at the front, noted the angles they subtended to one another, convinced himself from this that there should be one extra wall on the other side of the house, and was not surprised to find one when he went round the house to check. Win was happy, nevertheless, to have escaped the Demon of False Assumption.

The curtains of the house were closed. That was not strange in itself, despite the fact that almost every other house in the street had no curtains, and half didn't even have glass. Apart from the one place on the end that someone appeared to have unwisely bought before moving into, no address in the street ever got any mail. He had complained when the walk had been given to him. What was the use of walking half a mile down a terrace no one lived in? Dirty great houses with two or three or four garages, every one mock-Tudor, and each with its gas cupboard disguised as an ornamental pergola; every one different, and every one the same.

He had to walk three times round the house – absolutely sure he wasn't being watched, because nobody lived here – before he realized what the problem was.

The distance between it and the next house wasn't enough.

All the other houses sat in the middle of huge, defensible spaces of lawn, differently-shaped, but equidistantly-spaced, occupying exactly the same amount of land, the developers having realized that no one wanted to live next to anyone on a higher or lower social echelon than themselves. But this one didn't belong. Looking across the road to numbers 101 and 102, there was a

huge space the size of several poor people's houses between the two of them – a space into which Number Thirteen would quite cheerfully have slotted. Win had never noticed this before. Perhaps this was what happened when an architect hit the Repeat Paste on his AutoCAD without realizing. What happened when Town Planners did it, he wondered; but in his heart he already knew the answer was Milton Keynes.

Then he noticed the numbers on the two houses either side of Number Thirteen. On one side, the numberplate said "14." On the other, it said "12A."

"Fuck off," he said, a grin spreading over his features; but the house remained.

Who was in there? MI5? The Grand Coven? Were the two one-and-the-same? He rummaged in his sack. No mail for Number 13. His glaringly obvious Post Office uniform made it inadvisable to run up and boggle through the letterbox, even if nobody did live here. Feeling in the sack, he found a small brown window envelope with an unmistakable green tint. A giro, that would do. Pulling it out, he took his Post Office Issue biro, turned so he was invisible from the house, and wrote "NOT FOUND AT THIS ADDRESS – TRY NUMBER 13" on the envelope. Then, confident that he had armed himself with an excuse, he walked up the garden path to the front door, dropped to his knees and tried to put the Giro through the letterbox in such a way that he could see through into the hall, a manoeuvre practised from many deliveries to the exhibitionist lady at Godiva Drive. The letterbox would not open. Furthermore, it didn't just not open in a rusted-to-buggery or glued-shut-by-trick-or-treaters or nailed-shut-by-bastard-landlords sort of way; it didn't open because it was one piece of metal with the door and always had been.

He felt a sudden indignant sense of loyalty to his Post Office uniform; and although he felt dirty feeling loyal, he

felt good feeling dirty. Who were these M15 buggers anyway? No one installed a novelty trick letterbox on the Royal Mail and got away with it, nebulous international organization of abduction, conspiracy and murder or no nebulous international etcetera. He rang the doorbell. It didn't work. He knocked on the front door. There was no echo.

That really was scary. It was as if he were knocking on solid granite. The surface swallowed up sound, despite the fact that he could see the front of the house through the glass of the hallway door, and –

Wait a minute. He had left his Royal Mail bag on the other side of the house. Next to the ornamental methane pergola. It was a big, square bag, large enough to make him pull to the left for ten minutes after he dropped it at the end of a heavy day.

Through the hall door, it was nowhere to be seen.

He stepped back from the house. He swayed onto one leg and peered round it.

A girl was sitting next to his bag, on the other side of the house. A dark-haired girl, with a face that could have launched a D-Day invasion, but an expression on it that could have sunk a battleship. Wearing a polka-dot dress without shivering, despite the fact that Win's breath was steaming into the cold air like a boiling kettle.

"What are you doing on my drive?" she said.

"I'm from the Post Office," he said, all of the cleverer things he thought of saying freezing into stiff politeness, as they always did. "You won't get any mail if your letterbox stays like that, you know."

"I don't want any mail," she said.

"I'll have to report this," he replied. This was the direst possible threat the uniform allowed. If Royal Mail headquarters in London or wherever had been nuked by Russia, Russia would be trembling in its jackboots in the sure knowledge that it had been Reported. Usually all Reporting people got him was a sheepish shrug or a half hour's lecture on what the Mail used to be like in the old days when black-leading your oven was compulsory. This time, however, it got him real fear. The girl jumped to her feet, standing between him and his bag. As far as he could see, she wasn't carrying a weapon. He looked round himself for the big bastard boyfriend sneaking up on him with a length of lead pipe. That man was as yet nowhere to be seen, but Winston was sure he was just biding his time.

"Please don't do that," said the girl. "I'm sorry I was rude. My name's Judith."

"Mine's Winston," said Winston.

"That's a nice name," said the girl. She moved closer, most atypical feminine behaviour. "Can we go somewhere and get a drink – a coffee, perhaps, or a beer?"

It wasn't a nice name. It had never been a nice name. All his childhood long, Win had hated being called Winston and being white. Parents had forbidden girls to let themselves be taken out by him on the grounds he was so obviously black.

"I'm in trouble, Winston," said the girl simply.

"What sort of trouble?"

"I need diamonds," said the girl.

Win felt sick inside. "Look. I don't have any money. Pick on a guy who doesn't wear a uniform. Chances are

he'll have money."

The girl shook her head. "No, I don't want money. Just diamonds."

He scuttled round her, picked up his bag, and ran.

She followed him all the way round the walk. She had the advantage. She wasn't carrying the morning's junk mail for a chunk of northern Portsmouth. What was worse, with her being so good-looking, adolescent Brazilian Brylcreem addicts followed her all along the sea front. Win ploughed onward dragging a V-wake of Latin Americans jabbering "I lurf you!," "Chhhhallo sexy," and "Chhhhey, goot lookink!"

"I'm still here," said the girl, walking alongside him.

"Go away," said Win. "I'm a penniless second-year physics student with little prospect of employment outside places where they test nuclear weapons on Australians, labrador puppies, and blind people. I cannot buy you your heroin, and I have no clout with the Child Support Agency. Fuck off."

"At what point did physics students start wearing Post Office uniforms?" said the girl.

"You never saw me delivering mail. I deliver mail in my spare time. It's a hobby. Okay, I told them I was a Real Person at the start of the Christmas vac. in order to get the job. I need the money for my course and then I'm buggering off back to Finals."

"I suppose it would be a real shame if anyone found out," said the girl, looking round with emphasis at a nearby Post Office.

"I suppose it would be a real shame if someone found out you live at a Really Weird Address," said Win. "Now we're even."

"I lurf you," said a voice behind her. Expertly, she wheeled round and socked the hole the voice had come out of. The head the hole was located in collapsed howling. Win looked on as the whole hole-head assembly leaked real blood.

"Where did you learn to do that?" he said, scared and at the same time unaccountably turned on.

"I am comprehensively trained in covert Unreciprocated Assassination skills," replied the girl. "I could flip you over and make you break your own back in an instant."

"Wow," said Win; and then, hastily: "I take your word for it. There's no need to demonstrate."

"I'm in trouble," said the girl.

"I know," said Win, taking out the stack of mail-order catalogues he'd been entrusted to deliver and shoving them into a nearby pillar box where they'd be safe. "You need diamonds, right?"

"Right. You noticed the peculiar characteristics of my house. I am in fact really a time traveller from the 24th century stranded at the end of the second millennium. The house is really my time-travel device, and I need diamonds to refuel its peculiar and inconceivably-advanced propulsion system. It is vital that I reach my destination as, naturally enough, the entire fabric of Civilization Itself depends upon the fulfilment of my mission."

She smiled sweetly. Win blinked.

Then, he extended an arm. "I am pleased to meet you. I am Wing Commander Thrang of the Rebel Alliance, and find myself in a similar predicament. My Klingon Bird of Prey has crashed near here, but due to its convenient Cloaking Device, no one save I can see it. My vessel runs on Shag Power, and consequently I, the human battery of the vessel, require Good Head before I can Blast Off. Could you possibly oblige?"

The girl giggled. "Now you're being silly."

"And you're being Not For Real."

"I am for real. If I weren't for real, could I do this?"

She vanished.

The house was still there when he ran towards it from the taxi. She was still there, still sitting in the same spot in the front garden, still wearing the spotless spotted dress she filled so adequately.

"Good trick if you can do it," she said, and winked. "This device was developed by our techno-nerds early in the Bogeyman Conflict to prevent our vessels from being locked-on to by Bogeyman warships. Sometimes it even works, but its most effective uses so far are recreational." Her smile grew so wide that Win's underpants seemed suddenly, horribly cramped. "The principle is not dissimilar to the Cloaking Devices you use on your own Klaxon Birds of Prey."

"Klingon," corrected Win.

She sounded surprised, as if she'd thought he'd made up the name. "Whatever."

"Bit unaerodynamic, isn't it?" said Win, kicking the side of the house irreverently. "But I suppose chronodynamics is an entirely separate science. I mean, it's fairly obvious that a submarine should look like a fish, and a rocket like a giant penis – that's simple vaginodynamics – but for all I know, the most efficient shape for travelling through time might be a five-bedroom detached with *en suite* garage."

"It's in disguise," said the girl. "Twentieth-century art is very odd on time machines. You always imagine that space vessels must be very large, but travelling through Time requires even more energy than travelling space, and all your Time Machines are the size of cars and telephone boxes."

"Valid criticism," said Win. "What's it like inside?"

"Cramped," said the girl. "This is a one-crewmember model. It's actually ten storeys high, in building terms. What you see and think of as a house is in fact only the visible tip of an enormous buried structure. In an experimental lab in Portsmouth in 2332, there's a ten-storey-high cuboid of earth, stone and turf from this street, containing the truncated ends of two sewers, two cable TV lines, one secret sub-ground Ministry of Defence fibre-optic communications trunk, and numerous halves of highly-alarmed earthworms."

"Prove it," said Win.

"I can't," said the girl. "No temporal device can ever return to its home time. If I return back in time to do something important, such as telling Isaac Newton all about Relativity, I wipe out the section of time in which I decided to do that important thing. After all, how can

I have decided to do a thing which my own history tells me has already been done? However, if I return back in time to a crisis point at which history could move in an alternative direction with only minimal encouragement, by, say, hiding in Newton's tree and fielding the apple before it hit his head, time divides into two streams, in one of which I did the thing, and in one of which I didn't. The future in which I climbed into my time machine no longer exists downstream from here, and I no longer exist in my own time stream from 2332 onwards."

"That means this universe is slightly heavier," mused Win. "You exist twice in it. Perhaps universes with lots of time travellers expand slower due to the mass of added bodies."

"Now you're being *really* silly."

"No, listen. That would explain why the guys at Santa Fe who claim to be observing splits between universes can't get the experimental results they've predicted. They're physicists. They think the universe is nice and neat and ordered. They think every alternative universe is going to map cleanly on to every other. They didn't reckon on hordes of human day-trippers jumping from universe to universe and fucking up the mass." Win sat down on the house's baroque stone garden wall. "So what's so important that you have to cease to exist to get it? Don't tell me, now; your sun's going nova and you've come back to warn Mankind not to mess with the terrible power of Velcro."

The girl frowned, Win's roguish humour vanishing off her like spit off a kettle. "No. In the year 2326, in my Time Stream, humanity comes upon a race known thereafter only as the Bogeys, or Bogeymen. They outclass us totally in technology, in military applications of that technology, and in the will to use those applications; they were, or will be, initially called Bogeys because all terrestrial crews ever saw of them were traces entering radar range before they annihilated the encountering vessel. Their actual physical form – whether they really are humanoid or not – has never been ascertained. Time pilots from future time streams have returned to tell us that, as of the year 2350, all human life in the galaxy will be extinct, on all explored parallels. Through analysis of the Bogeys' super-light-speed drive systems – which, of course, involve time travel by their very nature – we developed, in 2332, the very first time travel devices which will evolve into the more sophisticated models of the 2340s. The Bogeys, of course, have developed such devices of their own already, and are attempting to prevent us from altering our own history to allow us to invent weapons to defeat them."

"I suppose they've tried grabbing Newton's apples," said Win.

Judith nodded. "And we've tried grabbing them back. That whole two minutes of time now looks like a baseball tournament in a fruit market in some parallels. The device I am piloting went off course from its intended destination in 1942, and Time Crashed in the 1990s. The diamonds its strange and inexplicably complex drive system uses for fuel were flawed, and caused a phenomenon similar to a thing which I have been instructed to refer to when speaking to inhabitants of these islands as a

'Flat Battery.' I need more propulsive fuel, and fast, before an enemy War-House finds me."

"Hmm," said Win, taking all this in without swallowing as yet. "How can you use diamonds as a fuel? Is this a Zero Point Energy thing, or Lukewarm Fusion, or what?"

"I don't know. I'm not a hard scientist. I am a student of Comparative History. I was studying for a PhD in Monetarism and the Primitive Imagination when the war broke out. I am ideally suited for the mission for which the General Staff selected me."

"Which is?"

"I'm going to kill Hitler," she said, her eyes shining.

After Win had convinced himself he wasn't really hearing this, he decided to reply to it.

"Okay. First of all, you've just told me it's not possible to affect your own world by going back in time and killing Hitler."

She nodded negatively. "Absolutely not. I cannot affect my own time parallel, which is irretrievably doomed. But I can create a parallel which has a future. One of Hitler's own deputies – his Commander in Chief in Paris, one Field Marshal Gerd von Runstedt – plotted to kill him in 1942, due to dissatisfaction at the way he was handling the war effort. We can observe past timelines using remote viewing devices, and our experimental historians have concluded that the situation only needs one slight nudge to push it into a time without Hitler."

"And you think the Germans are just going to stop the war without Hitler? Christ, they would have had their military General Staff in charge if Hitler had been dead. They'd have been twice as effective."

She shook her head. "Effective they might have been. Nazis they weren't. They would have sued behind the scenes for peace and closed down the Death Camps. Believe me, we know what we're talking about. We can look at past events using time viewers, without actually changing them. After the Second World War was won in your time, meanwhile, the Cold War ushered an age of distrust and paranoia that led to weapons technology advancing with greater rapidity than the sophistication of the world's political systems. For a good many years, half the world's scientists were set against the other half by their military establishments, preventing the advanced Hawkingian Naked Singularity school in the West from meeting with their equally advanced Kirlian Paraphysicist colleagues in the East until quite early in the 21st century. If we could push back the time of that historic meeting of minds by only as much as ten years, we would have the Bogey Implosor Device, and victory would be ours."

"What's a Bogey Implosor Device?" said Win.

"That's the drawback. We don't know," said the girl. "All we have is the Testimony of Horn. Early in the Spring of 2322, when our scientists had just about perfected the first Time Conveyors and sent a few labrador puppies backward and forward in time, a huge gleaming device the size and shape of an Egyptian Pyramid appeared in the Restricted Security area of our most secret underground undersea military testing range, and a lone

human being staggered out. He claimed to be called Horn, he was dying of radiation poisoning, and all he kept saying was, 'They hit us, but we won, we won, we won.' The device had sensor and weapons systems on it we couldn't even begin to understand. Horn claimed to have turned time from 2500, one hundred years ahead of any Time Conveyor we had yet come into contact with. In his time, due to this miraculous Bogey Implosor Device, the Bogeymen were on the run, and the universe was once again safe for men to kill each other."

Win made a face. "And you think that, just because you kill Hitler, mankind is going to land on the Moon ten years early?"

"I don't think it," said the girl. "I know it. When Horn came through time in his war-conveyor, he was shown, as is normal with all time jockeys whose origins are not entirely clear, pictures of the most influential scenes in history. He didn't recognize the Nazi swastika at all. He described it as a 'funny cross,' and thought it might mean good fortune."

"And that's all you're going on? The testimony of a lunatic claiming to be from 2500 who hasn't learnt his history lessons?"

"It's all we've got, Win." The girl's voice was growing loud, and her fists were bunching up into deadly little bundles.

"All right, all right, I apologize."

"I need diamonds."

"Don't we all."

"I need you to get them."

"Why can't you go and get them yourself? Strolling down the jeweller's with a Bogey Implosor Cannon ought to be nothing to someone who's just waltzed here from 2332."

"I can't. I can't leave the machine until I reach destination point, at which point the machine will snap back into my own time to prevent me failing in my mission. Remember, changing time is a delicate process. If I leave a dirty great time machine the size of a house in 1940s Europe, the change I'm attempting will be jeopardized, like hitting a microelectronic circuit with a hammer to fix it. This is a projection, Win. I'm – erm – I'm not actually quite this good-looking. I thought this might attract your attention."

"How did you hit the guy on the seafront?"

The girl grinned. "What guy on the seafront? If I can make one projection, I can make two. Or three, or four."

A horrible possibility came to Win. "You're not a man, are you?"

"Not as far as I'm aware."

Win nodded, absorbing this information. He put his head into his hands.

After a moment's thought, he came out of his hands again.

"If you can make three or four projections, can you make nine or ten with stocking masks and sawn-off shotguns?"

"This is my parents' prized and lovingly restored Morris Traveller. If your projections strip the paint or burn the seat in any way, it's plastic beads and rhinestones for you."

"Sssh. The Securicor car's coming now."

"Van. It's a van. What happens if your projections have to open fire?"

"They'll miss. Then they'll run as fast as their refresh rate and resolution will allow. And it will all have failed, and you'll have to get a real gun and kill someone, like a proper robber." She sounded almost disappointed.

"In your dreams." The dark blue van was turning the corner of the street. Win could not believe he was here, talking to a burly, offal-faced hoodlum in a stocking mask who spoke with a woman's voice.

"You'd better switch voices now. No one's going to take an armed robber seriously if he talks in a high falsetto."

"Is that better?" grunted the apparition.

"Now you really are turning me on. Quick, he's getting out of the van, the door's opening –"

Nine illusory shapes piled out of the open doors at the back of the Traveller.

"GEDAHDA THE FACKIN WAY!"

"Leave the FACKIN DOOR OPEN YOU AGLY OLD GIT!"

Guns went off. Or appeared to go off. Win was impressed to note that the projection even stretched to little dust devils flying from the dirt where the supposed shotguns shot. The security guards assumed pained positions of frozen-limbed submission. One of the projections prodded Win in the back with a shotgun.

"Okay. Earn yer keep yer blaggin slag. I'm prodding you in the back with an illusory shotgun, by the way. You may feel a slight tingling sensation."

"GEDOUDA THE FACKIN WAY!" said a projection to Win's left as he left the confines of the car. Another said "ON THE FACKIN FLOOR!" to a terrified old lady already on the fackin floor. The old girl crouched down even lower in an earnest attempt to get as close to Mother Earth as possible without actually returning to it.

Shit. These sprites aren't acting independently. They're not intelligent. They're going to fuck up the whole thing. Acting terrified in a highly convincing manner, Win walked up to the security guard. The man was Win's age and size, but big and powerful, having the look of an ex-Forces man. And this, of course, was Portsmouth. How many other Forces men and women were among the supposed civilians face-down on the pavement?

Judith doesn't come from this time. These guys and gals might be familiar with guns, and neither of us really are. They only need to spot one little inconsistency, and I'll be smothered in off-duty Marines.

Win picked up the bag the security guard was holding.

"PICK AP THE FACKIN BAG!" said the sprite behind him.

Holding the bag, Win walked back to the van under armed supervision.

"I SAID, PICK AP THE FACKIN BAG!" screamed the second projection. All about it on the pavement, shoppingless shoppers scoured the pavement for bags they could pick up.

Only a few yards away to Win's left, an old man in an anorak and tweed hat was grubbing at the pavement like a man who'd had his glasses stolen, though he was still wearing his glasses. An old man, around 70 or 80. It took Win a long time, too long, to realize what the old geezer

was feeling for.

Where the bullets had left their little dust devils in the pavement, there were no pockmarks.

Jesus, thought Win. All this time I was assuming the young ones would be the one to watch, and I have to bump into some old sod who fought at Arnhem. But the old guy didn't seem to have put together what his discovery meant as yet, and was merely staring up at Win in puzzlement, and Win was climbing into the car with the bag, and starting up the engine—

The old guy was sitting up now, turning to the security guards, and pointing at the pavement. "*Es gibt keine Löcher im Beton! Guck mal!*"

Result! thought Win. *The old sod fought at Arnhem on the wrong side.*

"What's he saying?" said a woman's voice like an insect in his ear.

"Pick the bag ap NAH!" snapped the apparition by the van, and fired its gun into the air. The sound of police sirens could be heard trying to travel cross-city against the traffic.

"KEEP YER FACKIN EAD DAHN GRANDAD," said one of his phantasmal accomplices to a dog. The dog was unimpressed and charged the phantasm. As the last-but-one illusion piled into the van, the lead sprite put a horribly real-looking gun to Win's head, and he stamped down hard on the accelerator. The wheels might have squealed, or she might have made them squeal. Either way, it was a convincingly illegal getaway, just as the dog ran at the threatening, cussing last remaining sprite and leapt right through it.

"It worked. Just. Now the car's hot. What are we going to do now?"

"Get the car back to the House immediately. I will project the image of a second getaway car to meet us and take away my projections. Will a white Jaguar X series do?"

"More than adequately." Win held the bag in one hand and tried to peer inside it whilst steering. "What do I do with these buggers?"

"There will be an inspection hatch open in the north angle of the garage and the house wall. Inside this is the feed tube to the propulsion unit. I will give you instructions as to how to insert the fuel."

How can a propulsion system run on diamonds? thought Win. *It's conceivable a zero point system might run on diamonds, but one of those could run on coal, or sand, or broccoli. Why specifically diamonds?*

"Keep your eyes on the driving," said a disembodied voice from beside his right ear. "You might kill someone."

"Got to behave like a getaway car," grinned Win. "*Unter der Laterne* –" he whistled the last few words of the line, then came back to the words again. "*Judith ist ein Lügner, und nicht das, was sie sagt* –" Pedestrian crossings and small children flew by turning red and screaming.

"– Und überhaupt nicht Hitler, sondern Churchill jagen magt –"

"What's that you're singing?" said the voice in the air.

"You don't speak bloody German, Judith," said Win.

"Perfectly suited to your mission, you said. Who'd send a non-German speaker to assassinate Hitler? You sad cow."

The voice became more distant. "I don't understand. What are you saying, Win?"

"Why did your people start you off from Portsmouth in the year 2332, Judith? You said yourself, you started out from exactly the same location as you landed in. You only travelled in time, not space, or rather, to the same spot in the same perpetually moving gravity well. Now, call me stupid if you will, but that suggests to me that when you 'turn time' again, you're going to end up in Portsmouth in 1942. You know what used to be on the site they built Villanova Villas on, Judith? Course you do. It was a bomb site, a direct V-2 hit on a British Marshalling Yard where they made boilers for ships. Very big ships. Royal Naval destroyers."

"Go on."

"One ship equipped with boilers from that yard shepherded a convoy across the Mediterranean to resupply the island of Malta, which I suspect you may also have heard of. A very important convoy. In 1942. The very same year you said you were going back to in order to kill Hitler. How were you going to get at Hitler exactly? Go over the Channel in a rowing boat? The *Penn* – that destroyer I was talking about – struggled all the way across the Med in the middle of a convoy of 14 ships. Five ships survived. The *Penn* was one of them, and she arrived in Malta towing a disabled tanker, the *Ohio*, full of fuel oil. The *Ohio* was the only tanker sent, and the Admiralty knew that if the tanker didn't get through to Malta, Malta would fall. The tanker got through. Malta didn't fall. Allied bomber aircraft operated out of Malta for the remainder of the war, Rommel's supply lines to Italy were cut, Montgomery won the war in North Africa, and thereafter the Americans decided the water was lovely enough to come into and landed in Morocco. But what if the tanker hadn't got through, Judith? What if, for example, some unfeeling bitch from the 24th century had put a Sonic Screwdriver in the works of the *Penn*'s boiler? Huh? What was it Churchill said Nazi victory would lead to? 'A thousand years of Perverted Science'? Ah, but Science wouldn't be so much fun if it weren't Perverted, eh Judith?" In the mirror, he looked at the sad, plain girl now sitting on the back seat.

The voice was tinier than a twinkling star. "I suppose it's no use me saying I was making sure the tanker was protected against the Bogeys."

Win gripped the steering wheel like a drowning sailor holding a rubber ring. "No."

"Winston, we knew we needed another ten years to get hold of the Implosor. We were prepared to do everything and anything. I told you the truth about Horn, with only one minor difference. Winston, he recognized the swastika. He loved it and cherished it. He fell down on it with fucking kisses, saying that Mankind had been saved from the Communist plague by a strong leader who was prepared to cut out the infection, all that rubbish. I don't like it any more than you do, but, like it or lump it, a Nazi parallel is the only future universe in which Mankind will survive."

Tears were running down her face. Tears were running down Winston's too, obscuring forward vision. In a momentary lapse of logic, he activated the windscreen wipers. The sun beat down from a cloudless sky, and the wipers squealed on the dry glass. Win suddenly became aware of the fact that the car was still moving through a landscape which included road hazards such as kerbstones, houses, trees, and people. He applied his foot to the brake and was most satisfied at the result as the car pirouetted gracefully around on four little clouds of steaming screaming rubber, directly in front of a crowd of nubile Continental language students. Why do such things only work when you don't give a damn, he thought, put the car in first, and blasted out of the girls' admiring lives forever.

"That was impressive," said Judith. "Or at least, so it seemed to me. Is that the prescribed way to pilot one of these vehicles?"

"No," said Win. "The prescribed way is something called a 'Turn In The Road Using Forward And Reverse Gears,' but that procedure takes as read the fact that you don't have the entire local police closing in on you, and that the entire future history of mankind doesn't depend on you getting across town in nowt flat."

"Agreed. What's that word 'nowt'?"

"Don't worry, Hitler's probably decided the entire population of Northern England are *Untermenschen* in your universe."

"I told you, Hitler lost the war in my timeline, just as he lost it in yours. Win, there's something you should know about me. My full name is Judith Koslowsky. I'm Jewish."

Win suddenly remembered that a red light rushing toward them at great speed meant something. He stopped the car so fast that the gun-toting projections drifted through the windscreen faster than Judith could reproject them. The old lady crossing at the Pelican screamed and dropped her stick. The projections drifted back into the car.

"Win. You've got a clear road ahead. Why don't you drive away."

"You're Jewish, and you're prepared to let Hitler win."

"It happened a long time ago, Win. Would you blame the Romans for beating up on your ancestors at Mons Graupius and Anglesey?"

"It happened a long time ago, for you. My grandfather was killed in Normandy. Three of my great-great-uncles died going over the top at Ypres."

The engine was still running. The police sirens were howling all around, hounds hunting for a quarry that had gone to ground.

"I'm sorry, Winston. I didn't know."

"No, actually they all died on the wrong side. I'm part German. That's why my father called me Winston. He came over to this country when he was a kid, back to my grandma's family after my grandad died in the Allied invasion, and his parents had seen fit to bless him with the name of Adolf. He reckoned Winston would get me beat up in the playground a little less than Adolf. But that's not the point. These people nearly wiped out your people, Judith."

"And didn't your own ancestors do the same thing to

the Irish a hundred years ago? And do you feel personally responsible for that? Of course you don't. Didn't the Americans spend one hundred years systematically exterminating the Indians in North America? Get down off your high horse, Winston. Do you know how many carefully-orchestrated campaigns of genocide are going on in the world right now even as you're spouting off about the evils of Naziism? Do you know what'll happen, if the Nazis win? They'll conquer England, they'll conquer Russia, they'll conquer America, and 15 years later Watson and Crick or Watson and Schmidt will discover DNA, and 20 years after that, Catastrophism and Punctuated Equilibrium will be the evolutionary buzzwords of the moment. The Nazis will be forced to say, 'Ah, sorry chaps, made a mistake there with all the genocide, no such thing as a Master Race after all, but it was a long time ago, previous administration, here, let's make up a few politically-correct words for Yid and Nigger and that'll solve the problem. We might even let you have some of your land back if you ask nicely.' Everyone always thinks genocide is the end of the world. It isn't. It's part and parcel of the world, like domestic violence on a grand scale, and it always has been."

The old lady stood watching Win argue with the huge passenger waving the gun at his head. It was a big, impressive gun. Win would have been afraid of it. But the old biddy seemed not to be afraid. She must have been 70 years old at least, and stood her ground at the crossing, shaking a stick at the car. Fifty years ago she'd probably been a little girl throwing stones at Messerschmidts.

"And what happens when your machine moves on? You'll be a Jewess in Naziland," said Win. "Like Alice in Wonderland, only with sharper uniforms. And you've got a hell of a nose on you. You'll stick out like a greyhound cross in a bulldog kennel."

"I'm prepared to suffer whatever it takes, including your racist insults."

"They'll kill you, Judith! First they'll beat the crap out of you, then they'll rape you, then you'll be washing with stone soap. You understand me? Look at it this way – your race is struggling for survival just as the whole human race is. What you're doing is condemning your grandparents to extinction, just in order to save the bastards who gassed them."

Judith shook her head. "The Jews will survive. They always do, under a dark stone somewhere."

Win kicked the car into first, and it rolled forward. "That's what the Trilobites said. 'We'll survive, somewhere, at the bottom of the ocean.'" He swung the car sideways into a parking space between two large vans.

"There's no one in the street," he said, "and no net curtains are twitching. Kill the projections."

The projections vanished. On cue, a police patrol car howled past, with two trained observers sitting inside watching the road. Net curtains started to twitch all round like the tentacles of a sea anemone. *They're going to spot the car*, thought Win. *Even with the projections gone, they're going to spot the car.*

As if by magic, a small but perfectly-restored Morris Traveller filled with thugs turned into the street from a

side road ahead, then tore away with a realistic CHASE ME! sound of rubber. The police car followed suit.

"Nice," said Win. "Your cars are better than your thugs, at any rate."

"I can do cars, movie stars, and Men from Mars, and demons from the nether pit of Hell. I could appear before Hitler in 1939 and claim to be God, and tell him to stop his foolishness and turn to Jesus, and he would. But that wouldn't do any good. Evil has to triumph, you see, Winston, if only a little while. A hundred years of tyranny for a thousand years of peace – is the end product not worth the price?"

Win wound the window down awhile and lit a cigarette. The smoke drifted through Judith as she sat on the back seat.

"You know," he said, "Everyone dies sometime. That goes for people, places, races, even universes. I'm British. You sound as if you're some sort of American."

She giggled. "Actually, I'm Alpha Centaurian, and my patriotic great-grandfather would have punched you for that, but I'll let you have that one for free."

"Well, British history the way the British tell it is full of brave battles against insuperable odds. Take Agincourt, for example, or Rourke's Drift, or the Spanish Armada. Follow British literature back even further, and you'll find Arthur, Beowulf, and *Ragnarökr*. If you look at those battles in British history which were really decisive, like Waterloo, or Hastings, or the Bulge, you'd think no one this side of the Channel gave a shit about them, but we made a bloody poem out of the pig's ear at Balacava, for God's sake. At Flores in the Azores Sir Richard Grenville lay. Lars Porsena of Clusium, by the Nine Gods he swore. To a Briton, it really isn't in the winning. It's in the going out with honour and decency, even though you know you're going to lose." He was crying, which was odd, because he didn't normally cry about state-invented things like honour, decency or the Feelgood Factor. "And I'd rather die on a cold hillside with my Post Office-issue letterknife in my hand surrounded by alien war saucers than kiss the fucking Nazi flag."

He took another draw on the fag. It was a German brand he'd bought in duty free while interrailing, called WINSTON, ha ha funny joke. Perhaps in another world it might be a British brand called ADOLF.

"Very poetic. Of course, you're not going to be the one standing on the cold hillside. Or one of the billions in Europe and Asia dying a slow death from radiation poisoning when they drop the Cobalt Bomb. Unable to even lie down on a sickbed because their backs are covered in pustules the size of dinner-plates. Drowning in their own blood because their lungs keep haemorrhaging and clotting with the oxygen inhaled on every in breath. Can Hitler do any worse, Win?"

"Yes," said Win, with absolute certainty, and shook the packet of diamonds out of the window into the drain he had so carefully parked the Morris next to.

Judith shrieked. "Have you any idea what you've done? Do you know how many billions of people's lives you've just poured down that drain? Look out, you're going to hit that little girl."

The car veered right. "Not so prepared to watch one kid die, huh? How about a whole kindergarten? This thing weighs a ton, they don't make 'em like they used to, it's all-over sharp pointy bits and splintery headlights, it's good for a whole first year. After all, one of them might grow up to retard the victorious march of Technology, and we can't have that, can we? Kill them all, Einstein will recognize his own."

"Don't drive so fast, you'll get yourself arrested. And me arrested, now. I'm stuck in your time, remember? And time is what I'm running out of. I have to leave the House, before it snaps back into my time."

Win was puzzled. "Why?" he said.

"Because I'm going to die in my time, idiot! I've got ten years at the very most. I'm not spending the rest of my life in a war zone. You're going to have to pick me up from outside the house, but be careful how you handle me, my pressure suit's going to be hot."

Win felt a sudden feeling of childish excitement. "Is the girl I'm seeing now what you really look like? Or are you hideously ugly?"

The girl smiled. "Hideously. Do you have a bed at your place? I've been sitting in the same position for over 300 years."

"He's taken the bait, then," said the Colonel.

"Hook nose, line and sinker," grinned the Lieutenant, adjusting the focus on the viewer.

"She's unlikely to divulge the real reason for her having been dispatched?" said the Colonel, coughing, and rapidly disposing of the mouthful of bleeding lung he'd just brought up in a corner of his uniform sleeve. The Lieutenant ignored this, covered as his own face was in a Braille dictionary of blisters.

"No. She's fully aware of the urgency of the operation."

The Colonel nodded. "Good thing we chose someone with no chronodyne training, too. One slip of the tongue, and a technomancer could have turned the whole thing into a bootstrap job. The time flow would never have stood for it. Whereas what we have now is a 'slight nudge in the right direction,' yes?"

The Lieutenant nodded back. "Time requires only very slight encouragement to move the way we want at this juncture. In our timeline, Winston Honigman committed suicide in the year 2010, penniless and single. Gathered together with his will were found the unmistakable outlines of a workable chronodyne design, a fact which wouldn't be realized for the next hundred years. Somehow, 300 years before we even began to imagine such things were possible, he designed one, but never built it."

"Any idea why not?" said the Colonel.

The Lieutenant shrugged. "The drawing was lumped in with a list of perhaps a hundred other inventions, some of which would work, some of which were worse than useless. Matter transmuters. Perpetual-motion devices. If there's a line between genius and madness, our man was the Border Patrol."

"But now he knows the Chronodyne is possible –"

"– And now he thinks we think the best hope for saving the race is throwing in our lot with Hitler – he'll

spend the rest of his life trying to prove us wrong."

"Our girl has studied Honigman, I take it."

"She practically worships him." The Lieutenant snorted. "Her doctoral thesis was called *Honigman: A Fin-de-Millennium Leonardo*. Now she's got the real one to play with, she must be either in pig's heaven, or bitterly disappointed." He pulled a cigarette from his pocket, one of the Last Cigarettes in the World, and handed one to the Colonel. "As our man will be, too, when he sees what his life's work will turn into."

The Colonel nodded. "The Second British Empire. A potentially benevolent technology misused by 'a corrupt legislature eager to gain power'... Whatever the guy said."

"A corrupt legislature as eager to regain the world power status it had once had as an old man is to rape a schoolgirl," quoted the Lieutenant successfully. "Millions dead as the Red, White and Blue blazed its way across the world, British soldiers storming enemy missile bases literally before hostilities had even begun." He shuddered. "The Post-Final Solution."

The Colonel puffed out a cloud of smoke. "Yes. The poor, poor Americans. It didn't do the Brits any good, though. Every time British troops turned time in their war chronodynes, they left behind them one more universe in which Britain prosecuted unsuccessful nuclear war against Russia, China and America and left herself a smoking ruin. And only one universe in which Britain ruled supreme."

"But what an empire, sir. The whole world pink inside a decade. A backwards-and-forwards decade, that is. And the Chronodyne invented in the 21st century instead of the 24th. And the Bogey Implosor (whatever it is) invented not long after. We won, sir." He recited the Military Litany. "They hit us, but we won."

The Colonel nodded bitterly. "Every time I watch that little bastard kissing the British flag and going on about Portillo the Strong Leader I wonder whether God really intended for us to be exterminated. Besides," he said, looking up to see more dust shake itself off the ceiling, "we didn't win, in this timeline. Only a few more hours before their ultrasound locates this base and they dump a big one on us. Been nice knowing you, Lieutenant."

"Likewise, sir."

They sat on, smoking, listening to the booms of distant explosions, the irregular dying heartbeat of the world.

The Lieutenant smiled round his cigarette. "You know these things are bad for you? They give you cancer."

The Colonel smiled back. "Oh, mercy me. Not more cancer. I've got enough of that already."

Dominic Green lives in Northampton. His last three stories here were "Queen of the Hill" (IZ 130), "That Thing Over There" (IZ 132), which was taken by U.S. editor David Hartwell for reprinting in his best-sf-of-the-year anthology (HarperPrism), and "Dream Blue Murder" (IZ 145).

Over the last few years Oxford University Press has produced a number of volumes which will be of varying degrees of interest to devotees of the development of imaginative literature. Back in 1997 there was *Edwardian Fiction: An Oxford Companion*, compiled by Sandra Kemp, Charlotte Mitchell and David Trotter, which provided details on many authors often overlooked in other "literary" reference works – such as William Hope Hodgson, Richard Marsh and even R. Androm. Last year there was *The Oxford Companion to Crime & Mystery Writing*, edited by Rosemary Herbert, which had entries on science fiction, the scientific sleuth and the psychic sleuth as well as on pulp and digest magazines and such crossover writers as Anthony Boucher and Fredric Brown.

The best yet, and the one closest to the hearts of sf and fantasy enthusiasts is *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, edited by Jack Zipes (OUP, 2000, xxxii+603pp, ISBN 0-19-860115-8, £35). I am a great admirer of the editor. Over the last 30 years, both in invigorating new perspectives of the genre and in anthologies and collections, Jack Zipes has broadened our understanding of the history, meaning and content of the fairy tale. Along with such luminaries as Peter and Iona Opie, Marina Warner, Alison Lurie and Terri Windling, he has saved the genre from being lost amongst a welter of nursery tales and childish nonsense and given it a literary standing.

Zipes now takes on his most ambitious project – to produce a major reference work to the whole gamut of the fairy tale or, to be more precise, as detailed on the cover, "the Western fairy tale tradition from medieval to modern." Zipes readily acknowledges that defining the fairy tale, let alone the Western tradition, is not easy. The fairy tale is a slippery eel from rivers that have sources throughout the world. So that although this book concentrates on what we in the west might regard as the traditional fairy tale, it nevertheless contains entries on Oriental Fairy Tales, Russian Fairy Tales and, of course, *The Arabian Nights*, though I haven't yet found anything on African, Polynesian, Inuit or Native American fairy tales. But I could be wrong. This is a densely detailed book with facts sparking from every sentence and it is only the woeful lack of an index (to which I shall return) that inhibits me from being totally sure to what lengths the book does go.

Zipes provides a long and detailed introduction where he sets out his understanding of the fairy-tale tradition. He has done this at length else-

Guide to Awe and Wonder

Mike Ashley

where, especially in his seminal *Breaking the Magic Spell* (1979), so not only does he know the territory but he knows the pitfalls. Zipes does not attempt a detailed working definition of the fairy tale. Instead he provides some parameters which help us recognize it, plus further criteria which help us distinguish the literary fairy tale from earlier folk tales, legends and the oral tradition – a background of material that Zipes prefers to mop up as the generic "wonder tale." The main A-Z Companion, written not only by Zipes but over 60 others, including Alison Lurie, Gillian Avery, Shawn Jarvis and Terri Windling, further explores these areas.

Although, somewhat surprisingly, there are no individual entries on



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"fairy tale" or "wonder tale," there are entries on "Folklore and Fairy Tales," "Myth/Mythology and Fairy Tales," "Oral Tradition and Fairy Tales," "Storytelling and Fairy Tales" and "Schools of Folk-Narrative Research." Between them these entries help establish the roots and boundaries of the fairy tale. They are abundantly cross-referenced to individual stories, authors or themes, making this one of those books which, like a storehouse of wonders, encourages you to follow the asterisks and explore associated nooks and crannies. Thus the entry on "folklore and fairy tales," in making a distinction between the two forms, soon cites Johann Karl Müsăus and Madame d'Aulnoy as two early exponents of each form and their entries lead us on respectively to Christopher Wieland and Charles Perrault and so on, each entry adding a further layer of definition, form and structure to provide an understanding of this multi-dimensional genre.

There are several entries providing overviews of national or cultural fairy tales. Germany, Italy, France, Scandinavia, Spain, North America, the Slavic and Baltic states, and Britain and Ireland each receive substantial studies, though, as I mentioned, the North American entry does little to explore truly ethnic tales. There are plenty of thematic entries such as "Feminism and Fairy Tales," "Drama and Fairy Tales" or "Opera and Fairy Tales," plus two worthy of further analysis here: "Science Fiction and Fairy Tales" and "Fantasy Literature and Fairy Tales."

In what is otherwise an exemplary and thoroughly well researched volume these two entries are disappointing. The first is the work of Amelia



The Western fairy tale tradition
from medieval to modern

Edited by Jack Zipes



'authoritative and fascinating' John Opie

Rutledge, associate professor of English at George Mason University. The entry shows a knowledge of science fiction but inevitably comes up against problems of definition and perspective. Whilst quoting various experts from Samuel R. Delany to Brian W. Aldiss, the entry starts by jumping right into dodgy territory in arguing that "science fiction and the fairy tale both deal with situations that are contrary to fact," a statement that I personally believe is false. All fiction is arguably contrary to fact, by definition. The distinction with science fiction is that it extrapolates to explore other possibilities that could happen, but these realities are no less fact, within the premise of the sf story, than any other story, be it mystery, thriller or high romance. The entry is on firmer ground when it considers that both sf and the fairy tale share a common ground in "wish fulfilment." Although not all sf or fairy tales would fit this criterion, a considerable amount will, allowing for such basic concepts as space exploration, time travel, psi powers or a change in the social environment to be wish fulfilment. However the entry then drifts off the path and "into the woods" by maintaining that the fairy tale tends to be "positively orientated towards the protagonist" whilst the sf tale is "neutrally orientated; it is a place and nothing more." That can happen in stories where a future or alien setting is used as a background but does not become part of the story, but a true sf story will explore the protagonist's relationship within that setting and therefore it should never be neutral.

These arguments show a somewhat strained effort to determine parallels or polarities between sf and the fairy tale where often they don't exist. Rutledge would have done well to quote Hugo Gernsback's own view that too much science fiction had drifted away from genuine scientific extrapolation and thereby had become "fairy tale." To Gernsback anything not grounded in solid scientific fact could not be sf. The genre may have moved on from those days, but the basic premise remains. The entry would have fared better had it focused more on the use of fairy-tale motifs or themes within science fiction, and though it does this to a degree towards the end, citing works by Samuel Delany and Vonda McIntyre, on the whole it blurs the concept of the fairy tale with the wider world of fantasy and thereby confuses the fairy tale with certain science-fantasy or sword-and-sorcery stories. It is a concern that an entry on sf and fairy tales can continue for nearly seven closely-packed columns and yet not once mention Henry Kuttner, Michael Moorcock, Ursula K. Le Guin, Joan Vinge or so many others who have integrated fairy

tale motifs into their works.

The entry on "Fantasy Literature and Fairy Tale" is by Maria Nikolajeva, an associate professor in Comparative Literature at both Stockholm University and the Academy University in Finland. The contributors' notes cite two books by her on the subject of children's fiction and that is the direction taken primarily within this entry, with conclusions drawn from the works of L. Frank Baum, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, plus cross-references to Lewis Carroll, Charles Kingsley, George MacDonald, Mary Norton, Alan Garner and more. It's another entry which starts in dodgy territory since though it states, quite rightly, that fantasy may have grown out of the fairy tale, it goes on to say that the fairy tale has its roots in "archaic society and archaic thought" whilst "fantasy literature is a modern phenomenon." I would agree that fantasy as a marketing genre is modern, having emerged in the 1960s with the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* and Robert E. Howard's Conan books, but it has its roots not only firmly in the fairy-tale field but in all of the early tales of fantastic adventure, as far back as Homer and Lucius Apuleius, and as near-ancient as Ludovico Ariosto, Thomas Malory, Francois Rabelais, John Bunyan or Dante. None of these writers is mentioned in this entry, and neither, even more worryingly, are William Morris or Lord Dunsany, two of the architects of modern fantasy, whilst George MacDonald, the true progenitor of the field, receives only a passing cross-reference. Thankfully both Morris and Dunsany do have entries of their own, both of which neatly state the context of their work in relation to the fairy-tale tradition.

I found that both the sf and fantasy entries suffer from an overly academic veneer, which looks superficially at their subjects without getting to the true heart and thereby missing opportunities. Nevertheless, one should be grateful that the entries exist at all, because they do at least recognize the friends, relatives and descendants of the fairy tale and open up the bonds between them for discussion.

In fact the book does provide a few entries on specific sf and fantasy writers. Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, Garry Kilworth (his first name misspelled Gary), Jane Yolen, Patricia McKillip, Diana Wynne Jones, Robin McKinley, Jonathan Carroll, Patricia C. Wrede, Terry Pratchett, Neil Gaiman and Tanith Lee each receive brief but informative entries (Lee's and Gaiman's entries are actually a reasonable length). In fact just about everyone you would expect to be included within the strict fairy-tale tradition has an entry, though I was surprised to find no entries for Terri Windling or

Peter and Iona Opie, despite their sterling studies of the field. But then there is no entry for Jack Zipes either, so perhaps he consciously ruled out students of the field (although Windling has written fiction), yet Marina Warner does get an entry.

But there certainly are omissions, particularly in that ill-defined territory between modern fantasy and the fairy tale. Nothing for Michael Moorcock, even though his *Eternal Champion* is a basic fairy-tale image. Nothing for Marion Zimmer Bradley or Andre Norton, even though their works frequently reflect fairy-tale motifs. No entry for Piers Anthony whose Xanth series, whether you like it or not, has I feel crossed the divide and is far more fairy tale than fantasy these days. No entry for James P. Blaylock, one of the best stylists at merging fairy tale and fantasy. Perhaps most disturbing of all, no entries on Thomas M. Disch or Peter S. Beagle, even though both have written modern fairy tales. There is an entry, though, for the film of Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*, although the lack of an index does not alert you to this unless you think to look it up. There does seem a divide between "literary" and "genre" fantasy, with only a few writers, like Neil Gaiman, transcending the barrier. There may be other references tucked away in generic entries but they're hard to find.

Which brings me back to this lack of an index. All good reference works, even those in an A-Z format, should have an index to alert you to further references within other entries. The alternative, as used admirably in the Clute/Grant *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, is to have basic cross-heads so that even though there may not be a specific entry on Achim von Arnim, for example, it does refer you to the entry on FOLKLORE, where he is mentioned. This volume lacks any such guide (where, thankfully, there is an entry on Achim von Arnim as you'd expect). I was rather puzzled why there was no entry on "King Arthur" or "Arthurian Romance and the Fairy Tale" and it was only as I progressed through that I found this is covered to some degree under "British and Irish Fairy Tales" as well as other entries on Morgan le Fay, Nimue, T. H. White and even *Camelot* (the film). There aren't entries for the basic creatures of so many fairy tales – fairies, elves, goblins, gnomes, trolls, witches – and I haven't yet fathomed out if they do receive treatment anywhere. There is no entry for "Magazines" or "Comics" though I stumbled across an entry on "Nursery Comics" which was woefully brief and incomplete. I also tried to find something on the wonderful but short-lived TV series of fairy tales *The Storyteller*. Neither it nor its scriptwriter, Anthony

Minghella, have individual entries but I did eventually find the series covered under both "Television and Fairy Tales" and "Jim Henson," the latter entry actually giving some useful data on how Minghella worked. But I shouldn't have to go looking. A good reference book works for you. I doubt the lack of an index was the fault of Jack Zipes, but was in all likelihood a production cut or an oversight by OUP. But it seriously weakens the usefulness and value of an otherwise important reference work.

Some of my comments may sound so overly negative. It is easy to emphasize what a book has overlooked rather than what it has to offer. At its core, in the fairly well-understood territory of the traditional and literary fairy tale, this volume is second to none. Whereas its subject matter inevitably overlaps with the long-established *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (hereafter *OCCL*) by Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Prichard (1984) and with the Clute/Grant *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997) (or *FE*), neither of which are cited in the bibliography to this book, it nevertheless concentrates with

remarkable thoroughness on fairy-tale fantasists and hunter-gatherer folklorists beyond the remits of the other two works. Allow me to cite just one off-centre example to help clarify this – Charles Dickens. *OCCL* has only a brief entry on Dickens. It mentions his *Child's History of England* and *A Holiday Romance* (both of which have separate entries) and goes on to say how his *Christmas Books* were abridged and adapted for children. It also states that Dickens admired Hans Christian Andersen and was a champion of the fairy story against the moralists. *FE* has a long entry on Dickens split into three in order to discuss his *Christmas Books*, his use of London as an urban-fantasy venue, and his ghost stories. Whilst it demonstrates Dickens's immeasurable impact on literature, including the transmutation of fantasy into more subversive forms, it scarcely acknowledges his interest in fairy stories, citing only "The Magic Fishbone" as "not successful." Although Zipes's entry on Dickens (written by Gillian Avery) is brief, it goes right to the heart of Dickens's relationship with the fairy tale. It cites his favourite reading, his anger at the Victorian desire to bowd-

lerize fairy tales and his own attempts at writing them, agreeing in passing with Clute when it states that "The Magic Fishbone" is "of no great distinction." Each of these entries gives us different perspectives on the same author, though in bacon-slicing out only those areas of relevance, it's hard to believe they do all refer to the same man.

As one might expect there are plenty of entries for writers and artists not covered in either *OCCL* or *FE*, ranging from Sidney Addy and Aleksandr Afanasyev to Italo Svevo or Joseph and Ignaz Zingerle. It covers not only the fairy tale in the oral or written form but also in art, opera, ballet, film and stage. There is a mass of material here to further develop the study and appreciation of the fairy tale.

So is it a book of flawed awe and blundered wonder? No. It's a very welcome reference work that sparkles at the core but is dulled round the edges and comes in a package that restricts its value. But it is still a stimulating guide through the tales and stories from which almost all modern literature has sprung.

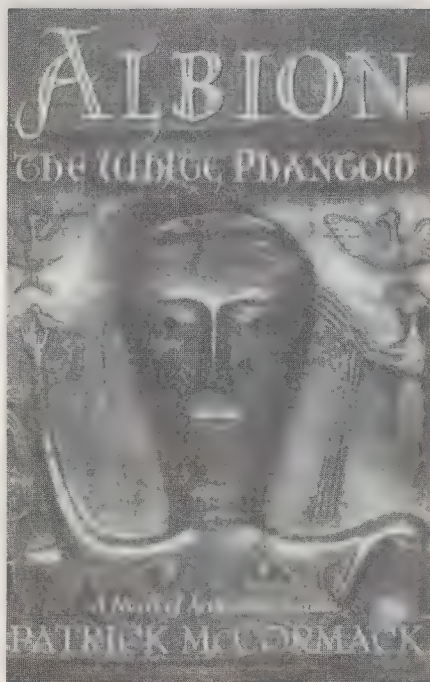
Mike Ashley

Writing in *Interzone* 127, I promised to welcome the sequel to Patrick McCormack's *The Last Companion*, should one be forthcoming. Welcome, therefore, *The White Phantom* (Robinson, £7.99), though the autumnal atmosphere I noted earlier is yet more intense. To my surprise, the youthful Ceolric and Eurgain have no part in the story, though Bedwyr (Budoc) and Nai, who survived the first book, are still on the trail of the Chalice, which they presume to be in the keeping of Arthur's widow Gwenhwyvar (aka the Phantom of the title), and there's a strong sense that this adventure must be Bedwyr's last hurrah. Their motives are honourable, as are those of the Children of Menestyr (Picts) who have an arguable claim to the Chalice, though their plans for it are very different; others have ideas less honourable, and no compunction about manipulating the unsophisticated Picts, as all follow Gwenhwyvar's ten-years-cold trail.

There's a certain amount of action on the way, and even some romance between Nai and a farmer's widow, but as before the book is really all about McCormack's take on the Matter of Britain. Also as before, its principal expression arises from the stories that the various characters tell each other. Apart from their unflinching inherent interest, these stories adeptly illustrate the characters of those who tell and react to them, with deft use of the Unreliable Witness. McCormack, meanwhile, has his own

Celtic Dark Ages

Chris Gilmore



tale, told obliquely through his descriptions of the Roman features of the country, as they are gradually converted to ruder uses, or more often fall into decay through the people forgetting how they once were used.

The actual narrative comes a poor third to these aspects, which doesn't really matter all that much until McCormack brings it to a violent and rather arbitrary conclusion. Having in the last ten pages introduced Gwenhwyvar, a lady who would obviously repay closer acquaintance, he seems only concerned to remove from the stage those players who would clutter the next book (which I will, of course, welcome – if only to see how she interacts with the young couple).

Still with the Celtic Dark Ages, Caiseal Mór's *The Circle and the Cross* (Earthlight, £6.99) is a much slighter work. It's set in Ireland a generation or two earlier (Vortigern is recalled in McCormack's book, and is an offstage character here), but except for two factors it would count as a juvenile, with crude characterization, a gung-ho, rapid-fire plot and a preponderance of youthful principals. The factors against are its length (536 A-format pages of smallish print) and some desultory references to sodomy among monks, which has little bearing on the major plotlines.

Ireland was never conquered by Rome, but is now in danger of conquest by Romanists – a small kennel of monks, led by the energetic and irascible Bishop Palladius, whose

ambitions are to slaughter all Druids, "heretics" (Celtic Christians of the Ionian persuasion) and recalcitrant pagans, and to destroy all pagan images, sacred groves, etc. Since he has to offer his converts nothing but eternal salvation (in which no one appears to believe) and his own society (raucous, rancorous, but not notably charismatic), one wonders how he comes to build up the political power-base from which he proceeds to create no end of trouble for the High King, as he foments bloody but ineffective rebellion while occasionally crucifying or skinning alive those who offer him disrespect.

A villain with neither redeeming features nor major talents lacks psychological credibility, which is a pity as Mór's good guys, especially the poets, are better rounded. I suspect that, just as writers sometimes fall in love with their heroines, so Mór has fallen into hatred with his villain, thereby coarsening the texture of the book. He also falsifies his own scholarship, I presume in order to make a political point. While I'm prepared to believe that the Irish penal code in the fifth century was more humane than (say) the English in the 18th, the High Kings of Ireland had the High Justice; to present one as agonizing, in the manner of a school debating society over whether capital punishment can ever be justified, is childish.

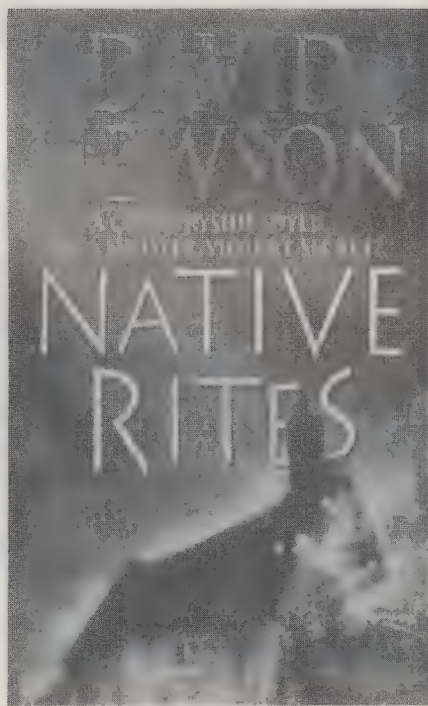
But childishness is the problem with the entire book, even down to the internal monologues of the characters, which are presented in a wordy and simplistic style, with all connections, however simple, stated – never implied or left to the reader's imagination. At least it's easy to understand, but I can truly recommend it only if you happen to be rather prim, aged 13 or less, and blest with a formidable reading speed.

There's a style of reviewing which depends heavily on the "A meets B" formula, the trick being to yoke together the unlikeliest pairing consistent with a minimum of credibility. In the 1970s even giddier depths of meretricious mendacity were plumbed, as certain academics bruited "the long-sought synthesis of Marxism and psychoanalysis"; yet the technique isn't wholly contemptible, so I'll essay a cheap laugh by saying that in David Hewson's *Native Rites* (Harper-Collins, £6.99) *Lady Chatterley's Lover* meets *Cold Comfort Farm*.

It's a profoundly silly book, written mainly from the viewpoint of Alison, American wife of a successful English yuppie, whom he brings to his newly inherited mansion in the village of Beulah (O Beulah Land! indeed) near Ashford, Kent. But alas! Beulah isn't like other places. People there adhere to the Old Religion, which runs to

chthonic ceremonies in the nearby woods and lesbian orgies indoors – plus a spot of human sacrifice now and again, and a bit of drug-dealing, and semi-public displays of incest, and wife-swapping on a grand scale, and (worst of all) cricket on the village green (bodyline bowling, *de rigueur*; cricket boxes, bad form). This is not what a well brought-up New England lass is used to, but Alison tries to fit in. Some adultery with the village bobby, a moderately gruesome homicide (arguably justifiable), and sundry drunken episodes show she's trying; but try as she may, she just can't warm to Marjorie, the village witch. Well, could you? The woman, though well into middle age and at least a size 22, insists on stripping off in public, feeds to the unsuspecting home-made cakes stiff with cannabinal, insults strangers on trains and owns some dreadfully naff furniture.

The hostility between the two women becomes ever more marked, but might have stayed under control had not an ex-village witch, now retired, taken a shine to Alison. This sits ill with the present incumbent, who in her umbrage works a malign magic against her predecessor, with the side-effect that the cricket team starts losing. Too much! There's a confrontation, whose outcome you must read the book to discover. To get there you will need to follow Hewson's narrative, which is soundly constructed if episodic. You will also need to weather his frequent descents into such wantonly purple passages on the topic of the turning seasons as would make D. H. Lawrence blush. I close with a typical sentence:



A barn owl rose pale and ghostly from a low tangle of bracken and field maple, dropping the struggling shrew from its talons as the strange, noxious smell attacked its nostrils and spoke of the other earth, beyond the Minnis, on the plain.

Oh yeah? Owls, like most birds, have virtually no sense of smell; but this is fantasy, all right?

I gave Steven Erikson's *Gardens of the Moon* only a modest write-up in *Interzone* 147, but since then there have been developments. The book has been heavily hyped on the net, and he's accepted a huge and widely publicised advance to make a nine (or is it ten?) volume novel of it. Aho! I'm bemused, but I'm a book-reviewer, not a bookmaker, and I have to say that the second volume, *Deadhouse Gates* (Bantam, £10.99, C-format), doesn't seem to offer anything remarkably better than you find in most big commercial fantasies. On a scale of 1 to 10, I'd give it a 7 (which is about what I gave *Gardens*), and that's being generous.

There are the usual maps (not so well drawn this time) and a big *dramatis personae*, not overlapping the last one all that much – Erikson goes for a high body-count – a glossary (likewise), and in between plenty of violence. The book begins cheerfully enough with Felisin, the 14-year-old heroine, being led in chains through the streets to slavery, along with sundry friends and associates. It's not a well disciplined march, and the coffee has to run the gauntlet of the mob. That thins its ranks no little, though Felisin survives to take up her new career as drug-sodden prostitute in a mining camp. Meanwhile sundry survivors from the first book are slugging it out with all comers as they struggle across the continent. The horrors of war are recounted in lurid detail, as are the discomforts of travel – Erikson has a superior line in noxious insects. Indeed, I'm put in mind of what someone (I think it was Lester del Rey) called an early Harlan Ellison: "A sustained and vicious assault by the author on his characters and his readers." (I quote from memory – if anyone has the exact phrasing, writer and context, I'll be grateful.)

He also has a few grim jokes to lighten proceedings, mainly when Icarium (the relict of an extinct race) and Mappo (also non-human, but still fully alive) are on stage. Of these some work better than others. The ones based on the personal peculiarities of Iskarak Pust, the deranged High Priest of Shadow, are rather predictable, but there's a neat dig at the fatuity of most PhD theses.

Altogether, this is very run-of-the-mill stuff, notable only for the vast size

which the finished work will attain. As we're less than a quarter into it I'm in no position to comment on the construction, and I seriously wonder how many dedicated readers will ever attain that position. Personally, I don't intend to – life's too short, and though Erikson generally writes quite well, his ear lets him down at times. Then we get sentences like this one:

Against the glare of distant Hissar appeared desert capemoths, wheeling and fluttering like flakes of ash as broad across as a splayed hand as they crossed back and forth in front of the historian.

I have quoted worse in these pages, and Erikson usually writes much better, but the repeated as and the jingle crossed/across are the work of someone

whose mind wasn't fully on the job. Erikson owes his readership a smidge more attention. If you want to pick your way through this sort of thing over something like four times the length of *The Lord of the Rings*, then the ten-volume *Malazan Book of the Fallen* will be for you – it's not for me.

Chris Gilmore

Some contemporary writers reveal their feelings about this world and its sundry factions by talking of race, of gender, of politics, of religion; and plenty, of course, inspissate their plots with all of the above. Science fiction sets the human race against extrapolative compromises of existing trends, or combusts us in a pot with an alien culture. But then... there are aliens and there are aliens – and one of the things that I have always enjoyed about the work of Terry Bisson is that he manages to make the parts of America he knows and describes seem alien to one another – and to me – before he salts the resulting mash with monsters – with alien beings, with oddities. Typically, but broadly speaking, with Bisson you have a clash of small town and big city; between, say, an Alabama wide-spot 'burb and New York. It's not *quite* the clang of Confederates and Yankees – but the surface tension of each piece leads to the emanation of a mixture of sounds and tastes, which is extremely appealing. The sound of the banjo versus the sound of ultra-modern hi-tech security systems; and so on. The collection under review right now is *In the Upper Room and Other Likely Stories* (Tor, \$24.95). In "The Edge of the Universe" the author attempts to pin things down, and this passage will also give some idea of the author's flair for poetic description:

"The biggest difference I have noticed so far between the north and the South (they insist on capitalizing it) is the vacant lot; or maybe I should say, the Vacant Lot. Vacant lots in Brooklyn are grim, unappealing stretches or rubble grown over with nameless, malevolent, malodorous plants, littered with roach-spotted household junk, and inhabited by scabrous, scrofulous, scurrying things you wouldn't want to look at unless it was out of the corner of an eye, in passing. Vacant lots here in Alabama... are like miniature Euell Gibbon memorials or rustic runaway edibles and roadside ornamentals – dock and pigweed, thistle and cane, poke and honeysuckle, ragweed and wisteria – in which the odd overturned grocery cart or transmission bell-housing, the occasional sprung mattress or dead dog, the tire half filled with black water, is an added attraction..."

Bisson's *Talking Man* (1986) is memorable for many reasons, not least of

Modern Manners

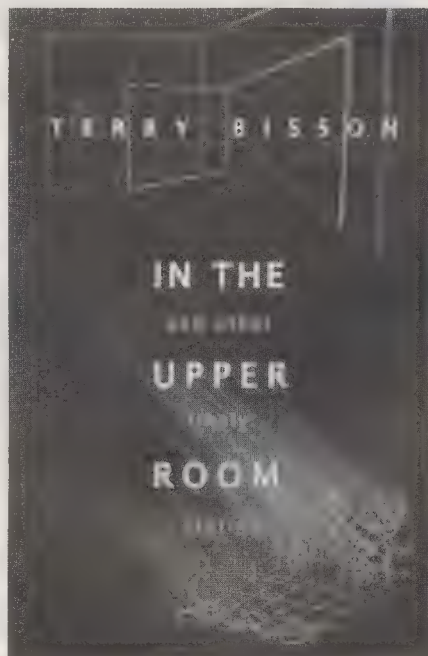
David Mathew

them being the descriptions of tobacco growing – a tiny detail, maybe, but it gave the book an original flavour. (The book is also remarkable for its description of a car journey across snowy wastes, which is simply divine. Bisson's work usually involves travelling of some sort.) Likewise, in *Voyage to the Red Planet* (1990), in the opening scenes – during which the crew of a ship that will take a movie task-force to Mars is assembled – what I liked

was the idea of an astronomical genius living like a hayseed, a hick, in the hills with his dogs.

It's the little things. With the work of Terry Bisson there is always a small picture to look at while you're marveling at the big. His work is humorous when it wants to be, lightly erotic when it wants to be, but always thought-provoking, and the affection shown towards characters (who might be blues-victims) is impressive. Coincidentally, here, the stories that originally found a home in the pages of *Playboy* are far and away the best tales; but it is not just the sex in the wings which leads to such a view: it's the *crystalline exuberance*, the sarcasm, the irreverence. From "Get Me to the Church on Time," one of the stories to feature an oft-frustrated narrator's relationship with his fiancée, but also with a mad shaman-scientist named Wu, comes this: "Divorces are alike, according to Dostoevsky, or some Russian, but marriages are each unique, or different, or something. Our wedding was no exception."

It's the sense of eavesdropping on something that is none of our business which invariably appeals. "An Office Romance" shows us what love is really like in cyberspace, and indeed, the title story is about travelling upwards through an unreal house, falling in love with a virtual woman (who might also be a computer virus), and endeavouring to find a passage to the room into which one cannot tread. "The Joe Show" has a woman visited by an otherworldly being – "an entity created out of the electronic matrix, a temporary consciousness put together as a communications interface in order to make a link between my Creator and you, the people of Earth" – the only problem being that this "consciousness" needs to be aroused, sexually aroused, in order for the fusion, as it were, to take place. The alien is thereby aroused (it's the woman's duty, she feels, but also a pleasure), and it is only later that she learns she has been but one of many women so approached; and that in fact even aliens might surf a different type of Internet themselves. So this story, then, has *us* spying on an alien who is spying on *us*. And these are the kinds of loops in which Terry Bisson likes to tie the reader. The hell of it being, the reader doesn't want to escape; he likes



it there.

Other stories are also worth mentioning. There are 16 of them, and all bar the dullish "macs" and the aimless waffle about time that is "10:07:24" are heartily worth a riveted look. In "There Are No Dead," a group of boys, later men, observe an annual hiking ritual until their dying days – and beyond. The dumb insolence of the title "Tell Them They Are All Full of Shit and They Should Fuck Off" does not do justice to this effervescent tale about how we are, on a daily basis, ignoring or at the very least misconstruing the messages that we receive from the wild blue yonder. Aliens, says Bisson, really *are* trying to get in touch, and the basic proposition is that they wish to be left alone.

In the midst of "Get Me to the Church on Time" this is written: "The plot thickens," said Wu, who loves it when the plot thickens. "He must be draining off the Connective Time to speed up his baggage delivery! But where is it going?" And the reader must be prepared for a little bit of mental gym-class, to follow some of the arguments, but that's fine, is it not? Bisson, in this story, sets the astronomical (a leak in time) against the preposterous (the plot revolving around luggage-handling and a dodgy old TV). And of course, what kind of sinister mind is behind the dastardly plot? Just a numb bohunk with a string of awards for his good services at the airport. Evil deeds are not *necessarily* the products of evil minds; but when viewpoints don't agree, sparks arise – and every spark, with this author, causes fire.

Now, two anthologies to recommend.

Black Heart, Ivory Bones (Avon, \$13.50) is edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, and is worth the entry fee for the opening story alone: "Rapunzel" by Tanith Lee. It's a beautiful story about rumour. A young man with the status of royal highness in front of him is waylaid in a forest, where he meets a lovely woman. They make and then fall in love: at which point we expect a ghastly revelation – that she is of the wolves, of the demons, or some such – but no, this being Tanith Lee, matters are far subtler and more complex than that. The couple love each other, and that's all there is to it: that's all there is to it, except for the fact that the young man is expected to marry another. In order to avoid doing so, he and the lady of the woods must concoct a tale – the eponymous tale. After all, most of what we now regard as fairy tales have been disjointed, plugged-up, rearranged over centuries. As the author admits in her afterword (all of the stories, and this is a wonderful

idea, have an afterword): "Any supernatural myth or folktale could have a similar base, and some maybe do... What endeared this debunking to me so much was that the deceptions sprang from love."

There is also excellent work from Delia Sherman (short but sweet), Neil Gaiman, Brian Stableford, Charles de Lint, Emma Hardesty, Joyce Carol Oates, Ellen Steiber and Howard Waldrop – as well as *another* ten stories, and a first-class "Recommended Reading" list from the editors. *Black Heart, Ivory Bones* is nearly 400 pages of quality, of class.

As is **Dark Detectives** (F&B Mystery, \$29), a beefy volume of stories about supernatural sleuths – or "psychic detectives," "phantom fighters" or "ghostbusters" as the book's editor, the indefatigable Stephen Jones, suggests. It is a largely successful collection. It opens with an enlightening introduction by the editor. He says: "For more than 150 years these fictional sleuths have been investigating the strange, the bizarre and the horrific while protecting the world from the forces of darkness and evil"; and he goes on to illustrate what he means, in a streamlined authentication of the sub-genre which begins with a salute to Poe and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and follows a breadcrumb trail (or should that be a bloodspot trail?) to T. M. Wright's parapsychologist Ryerson Biergarten, Mark Frost's Dr Arthur Doyle and Jay Russell's Marty Burns, via the detective creations of Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, William Hope Hodgson, Seabury Quinn and Victor Rousseau. Jones's attention to detail and his research seem impeccable, and I feel I *learned* from the introduction, which is also important.

However, *Dark Detectives* is more than a themed collection with a spot-on non-fiction piece to kick off with. It is a mixture of reprints and original stories, and they have been arranged (more or less) chronologically, in order to scalpel open a huge chunk of the history of civilization – beginning with a Kim Newman story set in Ancient Egyptian times, and concluding with a Kim Newman story set in the nearish future – to prove that both evil and evil's nemesis are always, and have always been, with us. And that is not all either, for the Newman stories are but two of eight (seven plus a prologue), the series being connected and unravelled throughout the book. In the appropriate point on the timeline, Newman tells stories about mummies and gumshoes and reintroduces some of his earlier characters, so that the entire enterprise is self-organic, almost, and very rich. He uses the idea of a cursed jewel (from Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars* [1903]) to connect the stories, while Peter Tremayne, Basil Copper, Manly Wade Wellman, R. Chetwynd-Hayes and Jay Russell also provide well-told pieces. But of course, basically, this is Newman's show; and after the intensive outing of, for example, "Andy Warhol's Dracula," this series of tales reads like the author with a drink in his hand. The "Seven Stars" stories are notably lighter in tone and pace.

Enjoyable about this collection also is the frequent suggestion that evil has a face; and of course, a force that is adoptive of human characteristics might even be seen as cutely old-fashioned. The monsters that one feels in one's head are arguably the most powerful; the very fact of physical proximity implies the likelihood of destructibility. But the whole point of *Dark Detectives* is *hommage*. And Stephen Jones has managed to get the balance right. However, if reviews have any bearing on a publisher's way of thinking or on the project currently in embryo, then might I make just one suggestion? Do please lose the illustrations. They don't *work*. Not only do the doodles of the interior artist, Randy Broecker, fail to complement the tale in question, but some of the illustrations act *against* the story, and a conscious effort is made to ignore the picture on the page. On the other hand... perhaps there is no area of the arts more subjective than the visual.

In the U.K. *Dark Detectives* is available from Cold Tonnage Books, 22 Kings Lane, Windlesham, Surrey GU20 6JQ. E-mail: andy@coldtonnage.demon.co.uk, and it would be well worth anyone's while to make the effort to get it.

David Mathew



Advance publicity for this anthology – *Fabulous Brighton*, edited by Elizabeth Counihan, Deirdre Counihan and Liz Williams (Shrew Press, £4.99) – promised “stories celebrating this unique town with all its wickedness and vulgarity... but not quite as we know it.” How well, in fact, do we know it?

I’ve lived in Brighton for a little more than nine years, though I grew up nearby and was a frequent visitor during my childhood. I remember the Royal Pavilion, built for the Prince Regent, later George IV; the two piers, the West Pier in particular with its rows of penny slot-machines; trolley buses on the Western Road; and a public lavatory in which goldfish swam in the cisterns. (Don’t ask.) But I knew only the central area, between the railway station and the promenade, east and west between the piers about half a mile apart. Now resident, I realize how much more there is to the town... not that I have seen it all. A remarkably hilly town, built, as is Rome, on seven hills; incorporating – dare I say this? – Hove; a unitary authority, part neither of East nor West Sussex; not as yet a city, though second in the running for that status behind Wolverhampton. (Chalk and cheese, I’m sure!) Where both the “Seagulls” and the “Sharks” play.

So how well do the assembled writers convey their impressions of the place? Very well. Simon Fanshawe, in his foreword, writes of “a perfect accompaniment to... the City Bid” because “it challenges the entire town to picture what we might be like in ten or fifteen years’ time” – as though sf is a predictive genre. Of course it is not and the majority of stories look back towards our Saxon past or to the birth of the British film industry. A few look sideways. Only one – my favourite – looks forward: Larry Matthews’s impressive debut, “To Walk Upon the Sea.”

Jez works for Nuland. They have developed a sea-solidification process and reclaimed strips of land – or sea! – to either side of the Palace Pier. His girl-friend, Suzy, is a Friend of the Sea: they have been communicating with the dolphins now returning to the English Channel in large numbers. The dolphins have been affected by the patterned electric fields that trigger the sea’s solidification. The story’s development is accompanied by the folding and unfolding of the relationships between Jez, Suzy and Nuland, and Nuland’s Head of Security, Pete Goodman, who suspects – and therefore has been watching – Jez. Ideas are clearly explained, characters are kept to a minimum, and the door is left open for more.

Another new writer, Paul Laville, also impresses with his story “Dr

tions between which she magically moves through both space and time. The sites (I think) are the seven hills on which the town is built. A deceptively well-written story leading us from the mundane world of the Brighton Festival into a new land in which we – or the narrator – are lost: functioning both literally (as the description of a journey) and figuratively (as the journey itself), as the best art must.

“Prince of Lamentations” by Liz Williams is equally allusive. But, in this story, the subject matter is the cinema and its “de-mystifying” effect on an “apsara.” She, Devi, is lured into the real world to star in a film; but, her glamour is elusive and to the camera she is invisible. Nevertheless, the finished work, *A Khyber Passion*, is heralded as a surrealist masterpiece. The story works on many levels: anchored in reality (post-war Brighton), an affectionate alternate history of the town’s film industry, yet with a universal resonance.

Veronica Williams’s “What the Butler Saw” is similarly playful, though on a smaller scale, and Peter T. Garratt’s “The Digger at the Dyke” is a coarser tribute to the films of (among others) Sharon Stun made not in HOLLYWOOD but in HOVE WOODS. (Ali Wooden held more promise for me.) Nick Szczepanik explains who the “Seagulls” are (Brighton and Hove Albion, a football club), and Lynne Truss reveals that the Prince Regent was a Martian (and we are not surprised). Peter James’s contribution, though otherwise gripping, wholly lacks a sense of place.

Of more local interest are the stories by Nigel Brown and Deirdre Counihan. “Sing a Song of Saxon” neatly resolves a conflict between the Saxon community of the North Laine – the word “laine” being derived from the Saxon word “laen,” an area of farmland – and a Viking “Development Corporation.” “Insinuations” is an Arthurian romance played out, quite literally, in my own back yard. And, finally, “Déjà Vu” by Christopher Enby. Not quite sure what it’s about... but I’ll give him a second chance. It’s good.

The book, as a whole, is good. Yet it barely scratches the surface: there’s far more to this town than meets the eye. What of the London-to-Brighton cycle ride? Wells Coates’s Art Deco masterpiece, Embassy Court, incongruously sandwiched between The Norfolk Hotel completed in 1865 and the aptly-named Regency Square built in the 1820s? Or – if you are a sportsman – the Sussex Sharks, the county’s cricket team? I do hope that the editors, encouraged by their success, will do this all again.

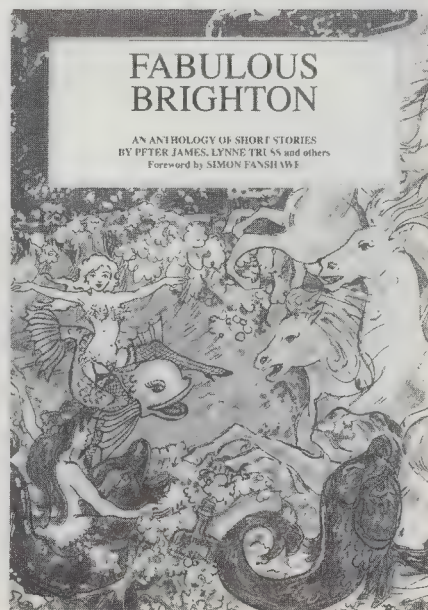
Andrew Tidmarsh

Fabulous Brighton

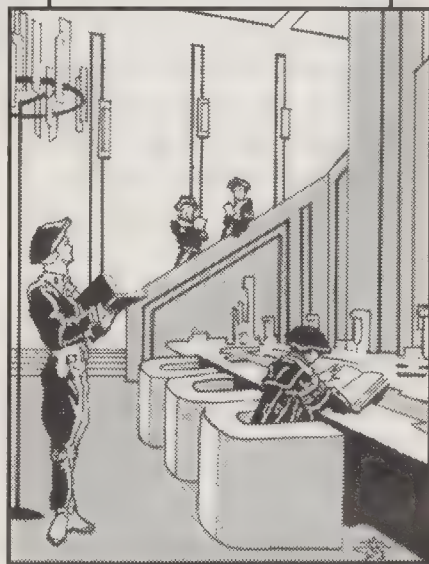
Andrew Tidmarsh

Theo’s Excellent Tonic.” Perhaps overly in the debt of Blaylock or Jeter, Laville creates an elaborate alternate version of the town – essentially Victorian – through which his hero travels to discover his fiancée and the restorative effects of the aforementioned tonic. Not wholly successful – too many characters competing for our attention – but full of energy and promising much for the future.

Elizabeth Counihan’s “Message in a Bottle” also describes a journey. Her narrator, Lorelei, is given a map on which are marked a variety of exhibi-



BOOKS RECEIVED



JUNE
2000

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anthony, Piers. **The Dastard**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86900-2, 303pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the umpteenth in the author's "Xanth" series, which has now been running since 1977 and seems of late to be aimed squarely at young teenagers.) *October 2000.*

Barr, Marleen S., ed. **Future Females, the Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism**. Roman & Littlefield [c/o 12 Hid's Copse Rd., Cumnor Hill, Oxford OX2 9JJ, UK], ISBN 0-8476-9126-8, xi+323pp, trade paperback, £17.95. (Anthology of critical essays on sf, first published in the USA, 2000; this is the American first edition with a UK price and publication date added; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen], priced at £49; it's a belated follow-up to the same editor's *Future Females: A Critical Anthology* [1981]; this time around Barr includes a solid, wide-ranging selection of pieces by such critics as Jeanne Cortiel, Anne Cranny-Francis, Jane Donawerth, Joan Gordon, Val Gough and Victoria Hollinger, among many others; sf

authors and subjects touched upon include Octavia Butler, Pat Cadigan, Ursula Le Guin, Jeff Noon, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, cyberpunk, feminist utopias and dystopias, Mexican and Chicana sf, "queer" studies and sf, *Star Trek: Voyager* and *Tank Girl*.) *July 2000.*

Bear, Greg. **Beyond Heaven's River**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-978-3, 256pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Harris, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1980; this is the revised text of 1988.) *8th June 2000.*

Bear, Greg. **Queen of Angels**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-943-0, 474pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Andrew Jones, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1990; one of Bear's most ambitious sf works; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 41.) *8th June 2000.*

Bear, Greg. **Tangents**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-979-1, 290pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1989; ten stories, including "Blood Music," the original tale which grew into the 1985 novel of the same name.) *8th June 2000.*

Blish, James. **A Case of Conscience** "SF Masterworks, 30." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-924-4, 192pp, B-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1958; Hugo Award-winner, 1959; a long-standing classic of "intellectual" sf – but don't let that description put you off: it's a must-read for all newer sf fans.) *8th June 2000.*

Bova, Ben. **Venus**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-72847-7, 404pp, A-format

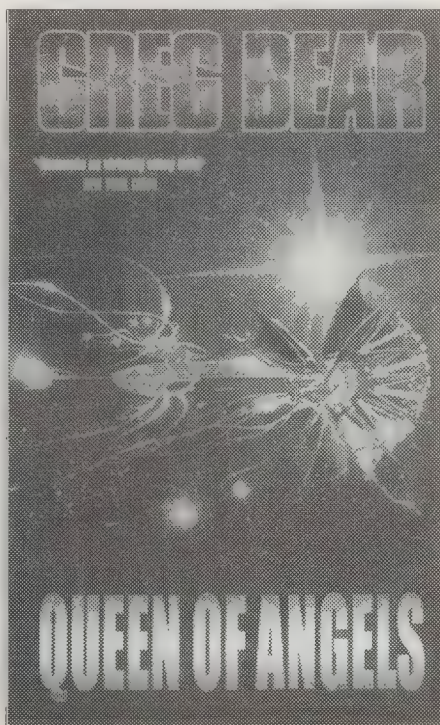
paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; this may have been preceded by a Hodder & Stoughton hardcover edition – but, if so, we didn't see it.) *20th July 2000.*

Bradbury, Ray. **Dandelion Wine**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-03770-6, xiii+239pp, A-format paperback, cover by Trevor Scobie, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy "fix-up" novel, first published in the USA, 1957; a minor classic of macabre Americana, it was cobbled together from short stories which originally appeared in an astonishing variety of mainstream magazines, including *Charm*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Family Circle* and *McCall's*; first Simon & Schuster/Earthlight printing; this edition contains an introduction by the author, entitled "Just This Side of Byzantium," dated 1974; Bradbury turns 80 on 22nd August this year.) *17th July 2000.*

Campbell, Mark. **The Pocket Essential Doctor Who**. "Pocket Essentials TV." Pocket Essentials [18 Coleswood Rd., Harpenden, Herts. AL5 1EQ], ISBN 1-903047-19-6, 96pp, A-format paperback, £2.99. (Episode guide to the BBC TV sf series, *Doctor Who*; first edition; this is a tiny book, with minuscule print and no illustrations; it's the first we've seen, but others in the series include "Pocket Essentials" on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Terry Gilliam, Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick and David Lynch; the series editor is Paul Duncan, erstwhile editor of *Crime Time* magazine, who has also written the volumette on Kubrick as well as ones on *Film Noir* and *Noir Fiction*.) *6th July 2000.*

Clarke, Arthur C. **Greetings, Carbon-Based Bipeds!: A Vision of the 20th Century as It Happened**. Edited by Ian T. Macauley. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648369-0, xvii+558pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Non-fiction collection by a major sf writer, first published in the USA [with a differing subtitle], 1999; it contains a great many short pieces, mostly popular-scientific and predictive, but some more "literary," ranging in original date of publication from the 1940s to the present [the earliest piece, "Dunsany, Lord of Fantasy," dates from 1942]; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 148.) *17th July 2000.*

Constantine, Storm. **Crown of Silence**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07079-X, 344pp, C-format paperback, cover by Anne Sudworth, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen], priced at £16.99; follow-up to *Sea Dragon Heir* [1999]; this second volume reveals [although only in its small print] something that the packaging of the first book did not – that these novels are part of a series called "The Chronicles of Magravandias.") *29th June 2000.*



Cook, Glen. **Soldiers Live: Book Four of Glittering Stone.** "The Ninth Chronicle of the Black Company." Tor, ISBN 0-312-89057-5, 496pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; follow-up to *Bleak Seasons* [1996], *She is the Darkness* [1997] and *Water Sleeps* [1999]; the back-cover blurb states: "If the Joseph Heller of *Catch-22* were to tell the story of *The Lord of the Rings*, it might read like the Black Company books.") August 2000.

Datlow, Ellen, and Terri Windling, eds. **A Wolf at the Door, and Other Retold Fairy Tales.** Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-689-82138-7, viii+166pp, hardcover, cover by Tristan Ellwell, \$16. (Juvenile fairy-tale anthology, first edition; aimed at "ages 8-12," it contains all-original retellings by Michael Cadnum, Nancy Farmer, Neil Gaiman, Kathe Koja, Tanith Lee, Patricia A. McKillip, Delia Sherman, Jane Yolen and others.) July 2000.

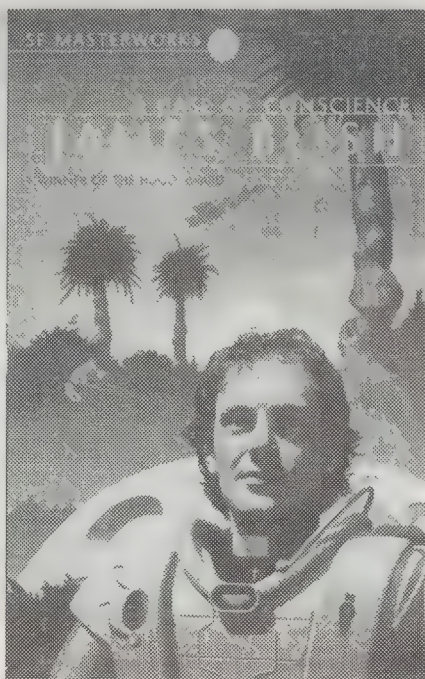
Furey, Maggie. **The Heart of Myrial: Book One of The Shadowleague.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-971-7, 505pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1999; the opener in another Big Commercial Fantasy trilogy of the kind that this English-born, Irish-resident author specializes in.) 27th July 2000.

Haldeman, Joe. **Mindbridge.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07114-1, 185pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1976 [not 1977, as it states in the book]; perhaps a bit less of an established classic than most of the books in this series, but Spider Robinson thought well enough of it to call it "a genuine masterpiece.") 15th June 2000.

Hubbard, L. Ron. **Battlefield Earth: A Saga of the Year 3000.** New Era, ISBN 1-900944-88-X, xxi+1050pp, A-format paperback, £5.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1982; this, the fifth UK paperback printing, is a special movie tie-in edition; "over 5,000,000 copies in print," claim the publishers; "translated into 20 languages.") No date shown: received in June 2000.

Laymon, Richard. **The Travelling Vampire Show.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-2052-2, 314pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £17.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; it appears to be an attempt at a Bradburyesque "Dark Carnival"-type story.) 29th June 2000.

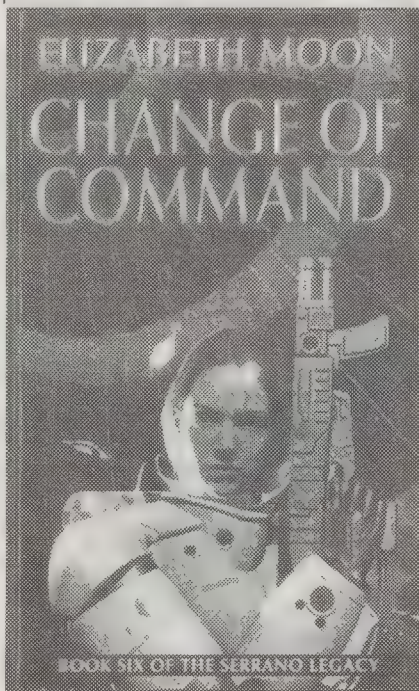
Leiber, Fritz. **The Wanderer.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07112-5, 346pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1964; a very enjoyable novel, and the most solid of all Leiber's books; it has always been somewhat denigrated by hardcore sf fans, because



it won the Hugo Award in 1965 over Edgar Pangborn's *Davy* [which was many people's favourite that year] – but in fact Leiber deserved his Hugo.) 15th June 2000.

Lewitt, Shariann. **Rebel Sutra.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86451-5, 351pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; set on a "colony world," it's described as "sweeping, romantic sf adventure.") September 2000.

Lisle, Holly. **Vengeance of Dragons: The Secret Texts, Book 2.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06868-X, xv+379pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen], priced at £10.99; this is Lisle's second book



to appear in Britain, although she has published a number in America.) 15th June 2000.

McCarthy, Wil. **The Collapsium.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-40856-X, 326pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; apparently a hard-sf comedy, it's described as "by turns hilarious and deeply moving, set against a dazzling backdrop of stellar catastrophe.") 1st August 2000.

Marco, John. **The Grand Design: Book Two of Tyrants and Kings.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-575-07072-2, 573pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen], priced at £9.99; another Big Commercial Fantasy by a new American author; the first volume, *The Jackal of Nar*, was reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 145.) 15th June 2000.

Moon, Elizabeth. **Change of Command: Book Six of The Serrano Legacy.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-972-5, 423pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; more military space operatics from this author who happens to be a former U.S. marine; from its outward appearance, at any rate, it's hard to tell this novel apart from David Weber's Earthlight outings, *On Basilisk Station* and *The Honor of the Queen* [see below]; space opera lives! – especially if it features a female hero.) 27th July 2000.

Mór, Caiseal. **The Song of the Earth: Book Two of The Wanderers.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-03729-3, 534pp, A-format paperback, cover by the author, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1996; the UK release of this one follows hard on the heels of the first, *The Circle and the Cross* [Earthlight, 15th May 2000]; befitting the author's Irish name, it's Celtic, Druidic stuff; apparently the author has sold over 100,000 books in his native Australia.) 7th July 2000.

Muir, John Kenneth. **The Films of John Carpenter.** McFarland [Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640, USA], ISBN 0-7864-0725-5, x+265pp, hardcover, \$48.50. (Illustrated "narrative" filmography of a leading American director best known for his sf and horror movies; first edition; sterling-priced import copies are available in Britain from Shelwing Ltd, 127 Sandgate Rd., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BH; an attractive McFarland volume, in their larger format with illustrated cover.) June 2000.

Murphy, Pat. **Wild Angel, by Mary Merriwell, by Max Merriwell.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86626-7, 286pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; an

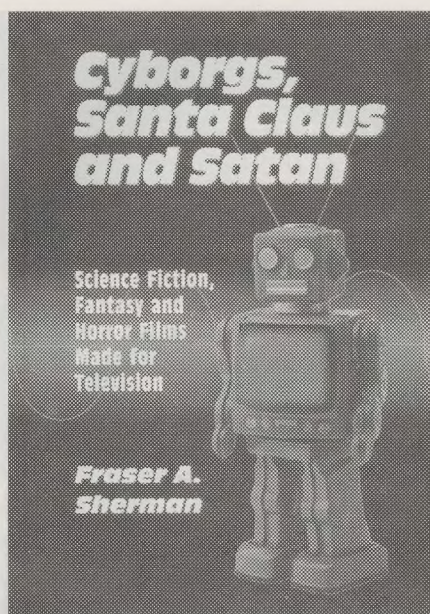


even more strangely-titled follow-up to Murphy's *There and Back Again*, by Max Merriwell [1999]; despite the tricky authorial games evidently being played here, the publishers describe these books as "no-holds-barred, flat-out adventure.") August 2000.

Newman, Kim. **Unforgivable Stories.** Foreword by Eugene Byrne. Pocket, ISBN 0-671-02221-0, x+340pp, B-format paperback, cover by Ian Miller, £6.99. (Sf/horror collection, first edition; suddenly, after a longish dearth, Kim Newman books are flooding in from all over; this is his second new collection this season, and his fourth overall [following *The Original Dr Shade* (1994), *Famous Monsters* (1995) and *Seven Stars* (May 2000)]; it contains 14 reprinted stories [four of which first appeared in *Interzone*], among them "Further Developments in the Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde," "Amerikan-ski Dead at the Moscow Morgue," "Une Etrange Aventure de Richard Blaine" and "Quetzalcoatl," and two collaborations, "Residuals" [with Paul J. McAuley] and "Teddy Bear's Picnic" [with Eugene Byrne]; the last-named story also appears in Newman & Byrne's book *Back in the USSA* [which has not been published in Britain, alas]; recommended.) 7th August 2000.

Palmer, Randy. **Herschell Gordon Lewis, Godfather of Gore: The Films.** Forewords by Herschell Gordon Lewis and David E. Friedman. McFarland [Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640, USA], ISBN 0-7864-0808-1, ix+193pp, hardcover, \$32.50. (Illustrated "narrative" filmography of a minor American director best known for his low-budget schlock-horror movies; first edition; sterling-priced import copies are available in Britain from Shelwing Ltd, 127 Sandgate Rd., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BH; from the [relative] sublime of John Carpenter [see above, under Muir] to the ridiculous of Herschell Gordon Lewis, these McFarland folks certainly like to cover the ground!) July 2000.

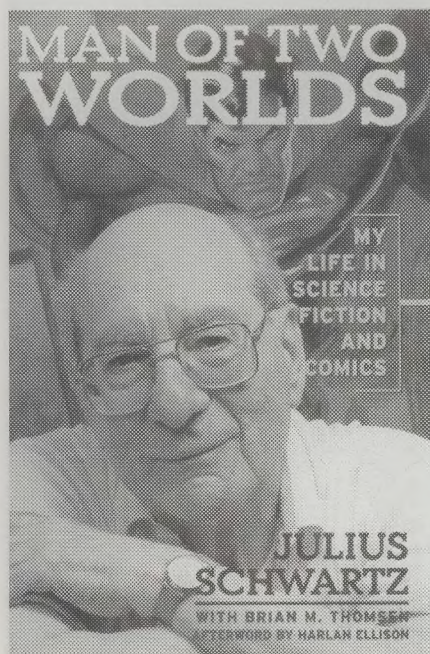
Ruber, Peter. **Arkham's Masters of Horror: A 60th Anniversary Anthology Retrospective of the First 30 Years of Arkham House.** Arkham House [PO Box 546, Sauk City, WI 53583, USA], ISBN 0-87054-177-3, xi+444pp, hardcover, cover by Tony Patrick, \$32.95. (Horror/weird-fiction anthology, first edition; a bumper collection of [mostly obscure] reprint stories, with copious editorial notes, by Robert Bloch, Nelson Bond, Ray Bradbury, Ramsey Campbell, Mary Elizabeth Counselman, August Derleth & Mark Schorer, Robert E. Howard, Carl Jacobi, David H. Keller, Frank Belknap Long, E. Hoffmann Price, Seabury Quinn, Clark Ashton Smith, Vincent Starrett, Donald Wandrei, Howard Wandrei and a few others: there's also a long and



most interesting introduction by Peter Ruber, entitled "The Un-Demonizing of August Derleth" [Derleth being the founder of Arkham House, whose reputation has taken some unjustified knocks in recent years], plus a small selection of H. P. Lovecraft's letters; recommended as an essential buy to anyone interested in Lovecraft, Derleth or Arkham House.) July 2000.

Salvatore, R. A. **Mortalis.** "A thrilling new beginning in the acclaimed DemonWars saga." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-43039-5, viii+484pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; with its smallish print and long pages, another big-big Big Commercial Fantasy.) 5th July 2000.

Schwartz, Julius, with Brian M. Thomsen. **Man of Two Worlds: My Life in Science**



Fiction and Comics. Afterword by Harlan Ellison. HarperEntertainment, ISBN 0-380-81051-4, xxi+197pp, trade paperback, \$14. (Illustrated autobiographical reminiscences by a well-known American sf fan, erstwhile literary agent and comic-book editor; first edition; Julius ["Julie"] Schwartz, 85 years old and a past-winner of the fannish Big Heart Award, has a lot of interesting ground to cover, particularly relating to his activity in the comics industry, where he was an important player, but this orally-produced book is, inevitably perhaps, rather rambling and lightweight.) 1st July 2000.

Sherman, Fraser A. **Cyborgs, Santa Claus and Satan: Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Films Made for Television.** McFarland [Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640, USA], ISBN 0-7864-0793-X, vii+280pp, hardcover, \$45.95 [USA], £36 [UK]. (Annotated A-Z of fantastically-themed U.S. TV movies from 1968 to 1998 [about 600 of them, including so-called "mini-series," or finite serials]; first edition; the sterling-priced import copies are available in Britain from Shelwing Ltd, 127 Sandgate Rd., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2BH; this is a useful stab at an under-researched area [TV, even though it gets the larger audience, usually suffers in comparison to the attention given to "theatrical" feature films]; unfortunately, the author has split his list into two – namely, those TV films he has annotated in full, and a sizeable appendix of others he treats much more briefly; some of those we might regard as the most important, e.g. *The Day After* [1983], are dealt with only in the appendix, where we're not given directors' names, etc [it was Nicholas Meyer in that case, and it's arguably his most significant film]; nevertheless, this is another nicely-produced volume from McFarland, in their larger format.) In the USA, August 2000; in the UK, September 2000.

Silverberg, Robert, ed. **Far Horizons: All New Tales from the Greatest Worlds of Science Fiction.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-968-7, 691pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £7.99. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 1999; all-original stories, each set in one of its creator's best-known universes, by Greg Bear, Gregory Benford, David Brin, Orson Scott Card, Joe Haldeman, Ursula Le Guin, Nancy Kress, Anne McCaffrey, Frederik Pohl and Dan Simmons – plus a story by Silverberg himself, in his "Roma Eterna" series.) 6th July 2000.

Slonczewski, Joan. **Brain Plague.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86718-2, 384pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is hard sf by [as the publishers call her] "the dean of biological sf" – set in the same universe as her *A Door into Ocean* [1986], *Daughter of Elysium* [1993] and *The Children Star* [1998].) August 2000.

Smith, Cordwainer. **Norstrilia**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07018-8, 277pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in this form in the USA, 1975; originally published in book form [with additional bridging text] as two short novels, *The Planet Buyer* [1964] and *The Underpeople* [1968]; "Cordwainer Smith" was a pseudonym of Paul M. A. Linebarger [1911-1966]; this appears to be a straight photo-reproduction of the Del Rey Books edition, complete with the original afterword by J. J. Pierce.) 15th June 2000.

Stasheff, Christopher. **A Wizard in the Way**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86648-8, 224pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; latest in the "Chronicles of the Rogue Wizard" sub-series of Stasheff's interminable semi-humorous science-fantasy cycle which began way-back-when with *The Warlock in Spite of Himself* [1969].) September 2000.

Weber, David. **The Honor of the Queen**. "Honor Harrington: 2." Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-0823-3, 422pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; it's space opera, but it states in small print on the back, "File under Fantasy" – well, perhaps that's fair enough: space opera always was fantasy in a sense...) 17th July 2000.

Weber, David. **On Basilisk Station**. "Introducing Honor Harrington." Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-0822-5, 422pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; it's dedicated, "To C. S. Forester, with thanks for hours of enjoyment, years of inspiration, and a lifetime of admiration" – so this one certainly wears its "Hornblower in space" heart on its sleeve.) 19th June 2000.

Wells, Martha. **Wheel of the Infinite**. HarperCollins/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97335-9, 355pp, hardcover, cover by Donato Giancola, \$24. (Fantasy novel, first edition; an attractively packaged fourth novel by this relatively new writer who comes with praise from people who should know, such C. J. Cherryh, "Robin Hobb" and Sean Russell; the publishers make rather an extraordinary claim for her in their blurb: "a master builder of alternate worlds peopled with souls as rich and complex as any that have ever known life within book pages"; phew!) 1st July 2000.

Zelazny, Roger. **This Immortal**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07115-X, 174pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1966; a Hugo Award-winner in its day, in its shorter magazine version originally published as "...And Call Me Conrad.") 15th June 2000.

"Captain Starlight and the Flying Saucer" by Ivan Jurisevic. A mileage thing; might have worked at half the length.

"Just Like Eddy" by Kim Newman. Exactly as boring as you'd expect a story to be when it is based on such a premise. Okay, so there's been some confusion over Poe's first name(s). But there is nothing – nothing – interesting about that.

"Angel Down, Sussex" by Kim Newman. A month on and, still reeling from "Just Like Eddy," I did not take kindly to the idea of a tongue-in-cheek story about Arthur Conan Doyle.

"Shaping Up" by Helen Patrice. Funny how it's perfectly acceptable for a female slob to have sex with a dog in "Loving Sancho" by George Jenner. Granted, there is an adultery issue here, but there's no attempt to understand Des's problem (he presumably cannot control his lycanthropy). Imagine the uproar if someone wrote a story about a female being chided for being fat, and punished with mutilation for the thing she cannot control each month... A shameful story.

And here are some that were "stuck in neutral" (stories that didn't quite make it into the especially liked or hated category):

"Alien TV" by Paul J. McAuley. Nice image, but not a great story.

"Malignos" by Richard Calder. Interesting and well-written; simply not quite my thing.

"The Astronomer" by Zoran Zivkovic. I generally like *Interzone's* stories-in-translation, and I'm fairly clued-up on astronomy, but I didn't have a clue what this was about. (Ditto "The Window.")

"Galactic North" by Alastair Reynolds. Some of the imagery (e.g. the chalice) and the scale (e.g. looking down on the galaxy) was very nice. Much good about it, in fact, but that's weighed against the opening which was simply bad reportage. In the very first paragraph it's not clear if the servitor belongs to the good guys (transmitting in the sense of relaying a radio message) or the bad guys (transmitting in the sense of emitting infrared radiation); it's not clear if the good guys are trying to fight their way in, or prevent the bad guys from fighting their way in. Then there's the greenfly, the power of which should have been anticipated.

"New Words of Power" by Sean McMullen. Competent, but simply not fun enough. He can do so much better.

"The Bicycle Net" by Kate Orman. Girl loses bicycle, then – through no effort of her own – gets it back. I have read some marvellous descriptive passages from Orman – most memorable

being Dr Who holding a dead child in his arms, said child being impaled by an arrow, and we only learn later that the child was impaled after he'd taken it in his arms, and he himself has been impaled – but she rarely manages to string a story together, and she certainly hasn't here.

"The Rot" by Christopher Kenworthy. Enjoyable but too similar to everything else he's ever written.

"At The Corner of Darwin and Eternity" by Robert Reed. A shame this appeared immediately after the similar but much better "Border Guards". And I didn't understand the ending.

"Turn-of-the-Century Real Life" by Don Webb. What do you get when you cross a tired Internet joke about a talking frog with a tired stereotype of a computer programmer? I am a little fed up with the old programmer-as-social-inadequate stereotype. I know a lot of people who work with PCs, and only one is socially inadequate. The rest are as varied as almost any other professional, and you can have an intelligent conversation with nearly all of them. Incidentally, I do not feel threatened by stereotyping; merely dismayed when it renders a story dull.

Well, that's it for another year. A little harsh in places, I'm afraid, but the stories in the current year's issues look more promising. The regular appearance of Liz Williams is pleasing, ditto new "Xeelee" stories from Stephen Baxter, ditto more Tanith Lee and much else. And the non-fiction is rarely below par.

Paul Beardsley
Havant, Hampshire

Dear Editors:

I was very much impressed by the intricacy of Peter F. Hamilton's "The Suspect Genome" (*Interzone* #156). The numerous scene-changes set a real challenge for the author and he pulled it together very nicely. (The only quibble I have is that with all the advanced identification-technology hypothesized in the story, don't you think valuable paintings would have a registry of some kind that Townsend would be able to consult?)

I enjoyed the interview with Harlan Ellison. So far I have read only one of his stories, and this makes me eager to read more. The reviews have also given me a number of very good leads. And I still have the shorter story selections to look forward to.

Thank you for such a fine product.
Joe Parchelo
USA

Small Ads can be found on the inside front cover of this issue.

IAIN M. BANKS

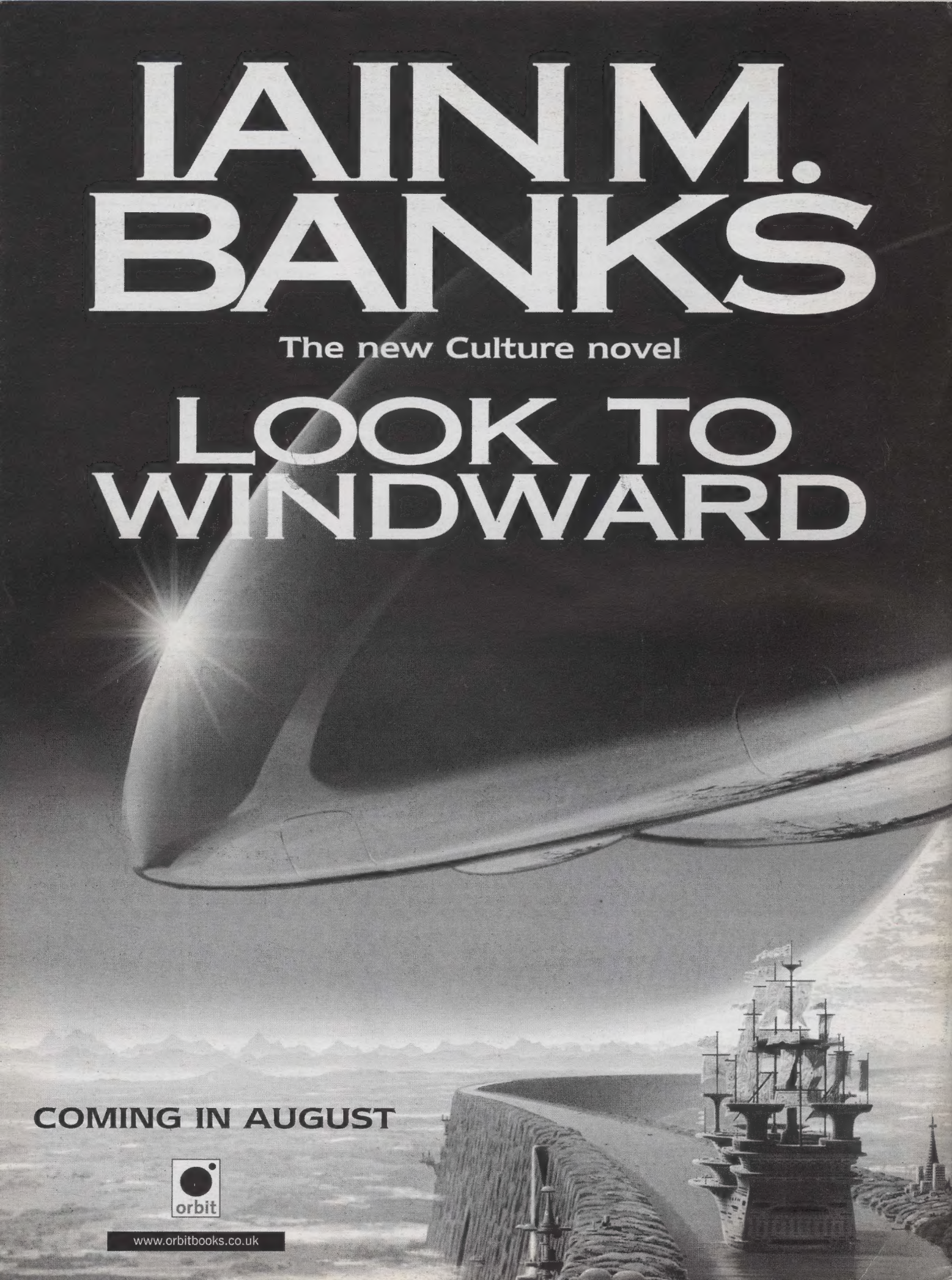
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